

University of South Wales



2059414



Embodying Identity: Representations of the Body in Welsh Writing in English

Harri Garrod Roberts

Submitted for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF GLAMORGAN

January 2005

Declaration / Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed (Candidate)

Date.....

Statement 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by chapter footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed..... (Candidate)

Date.....

Statement 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed..... (Candidate)

Date.....

Abstract

Since the time of Freud, some of the most radical innovators within critical theory have repeatedly stressed the importance of the body and its representation to the constitution of subjectivity. This thesis explores some of the theoretical debates surrounding the body, and assesses the value of 'the body' as a critical concept, through an analysis of the body's representation in both Welsh writing in English and discourse about Wales more generally.

Through combining psychoanalytic with more culturally orientated approaches to the body, I produce in this study an historically informed account of the body in Welsh writing in English, analysing its role in the construction and contestation of identity at a cultural as well as individual level. In the process, I interrogate the ideological concepts underpinning psychoanalytic discourse, positioning its postulates (and accordingly modifying them) within the context of more culturally and historically aware accounts of Welsh literary practice. Most importantly, however, this thesis offers a new and radical contribution to the rapidly expanding critical literature on Wales concerned with exploring the construction of identity in a Welsh cultural context. While the need for such work in a multicultural, post-devolutionary Wales has been widely recognised, the role of the body in the formation and contestation of identity has yet to be examined with any degree of adequacy or theoretical rigour within a Welsh context. It is a primary intention of this study to begin to rectify this area of critical neglect and provide the groundwork for subsequent investigations.

Contents

Acknowledgements	6
List of Abbreviations	7
Introduction	9
1. Theorising the Body: Reading Kristeva's Theory of Abjection through Bakhtin, Foucault and Bhabha	21
Kristevan Abjection	22
Bakhtin and the Grotesque	29
Constructing the Object: Power and Discourse in Foucault	37
Resisting the Essential: Bhabha and Hybridity	42
2. Class, Nation and Corporeality in the 1847 Blue Books Report	49
Contextualising the Report	52
Language and the Body in the Report	64
The Aftermath	77
3. Rejecting the <i>Gwerin</i> : Biblical Abjection in Caradoc Evans's <i>My People</i>	88
A Biblical Society	93
The Object Maternal in 'Be This Her Memorial'	108
4. 'From the first declension of the flesh': Childhood and Immaturity in Dylan Thomas's Early Poetry	122
Constructing the Child	130
'Before I knocked': Thomas's Early Poetic Practice	144

5. '[W]hatever / I throw up now is still theirs': Abjecting the English in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas	164
'[S]elf-given wounds / Wasted it': R. S. Thomas and Wales	174
6. Writing the Abject in Two Welsh Novels in English: Glyn Jones's <i>The Valley, The City, The Village</i> and Niall Griffiths's <i>Grits</i>	192
Heteroglossia and the Grotesque in <i>The Valley, The City, The Village</i>	204
Confronting the Abject: Niall Griffiths's <i>Grits</i>	216
7. Writing the Female Body: Margiad Evans's <i>Wooden Doctor</i> and Rachel Trezise's <i>Goldfish Bowl</i>	239
Romancing the Border: Margiad Evans and Wales	246
Escaping the Self: <i>In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl</i>	266
Conclusion	277
Bibliography	282

Acknowledgements

My most heartfelt thanks go out to my supervisor, Professor Jane Aaron, without whose constant support and encouragement this thesis would never have been written. Also at the University of Glamorgan, I would like to thank Professor Jeremy Hooker, whose critical insights proved invaluable on numerous occasions. Gratitude is also due to the Arts and Humanities Research Board, who funded the three years of my research.

On a more personal level, I would like to thank my friends – Dr Richard Chamberlain, Dr Chris Wigginton, and Marcus Leaning – for their support and encouragement over the years and, in the case of Chris, for providing me with a computer on which to write my final two chapters.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the continual support of my family and my partner Jo. At various key stages during my research, both have provided me with computers on which to work and (more importantly) ensured that I continued to eat. For this and for believing in me, thank you.

List of Abbreviations

References to the following publications are in abbreviated form within the main body of the text. The abbreviations, and the texts to which they refer, are listed here alphabetically:

BB Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998)

CD Margiad Evans, *Country Dance* [1932] (London: John Calder, 1978)

CPDT Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-53*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud [1988] (London: Everyman, 1993)

CPRS R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945-90* [1993] (London: Phoenix, 1995)

DN Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' [1934-35], in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422

Gr Niall Griffiths, *Grits* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000)

HS Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley [1978] (London: Penguin, 1990)

IOGB Rachel Trezise, *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* (Cardiff: Parthian, 2000)

LC Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)

MP Caradoc Evans, *My People* [1915], ed. John Harris (Bridgend: Seren, 1987)

PH Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987)

RW Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky [1968] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984)

SPr R. S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983)

VCV Glyn Jones, *The Valley, The City, The Village* (London: Dent, 1956)

WD Margiad Evans, *The Wooden Doctor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1933)

Introduction

Since the advent of Sigmund Freud's pioneering work, the most radical innovators within critical theory have continued to stress the importance of the body and its representation to the constitution of subjectivity. In a lucid summary of contemporary critical thinking on the body, which draws upon the work not only of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, but also Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Gross makes this important observation:

[T]he ways in which the body is coded, made meaningful, and rendered representable provide some of the necessary conditions for discursive and cultural representation. . . . [T]he subject is not an unanchored, disembodied psychical entity . . . [but] is a subject, an ego, only with reference to the mapping and signification of its corporeality.¹

Crucially, this 'mapping' of the nascent subject's corporeality is not simply a process whereby the subject becomes aware of its body in a strictly biological sense, but is a phenomenon in which the subject constructs and internalises its own fantasised image of the body, an image which reflects social, cultural and familial beliefs about the body and its symbolic significance. The subject is thus positioned in relationship to its anatomy in terms of that anatomy's social meaning. As such, the image of the body which it constructs is one that is inherently fragile and always potentially contestable. Not only does the intermeshing of the body with

signifying systems produce meaning and identity, it also provides the possibility of their disruption or collapse.

Admittedly, the centrality of the body within contemporary critical discourse has not gone unchallenged, one of the most telling criticisms being that of latent essentialism. As Jeffrey Weeks has observed, ‘It is difficult to see why the “body” should have a “reality” denied other social phenomena.’² However, in their ground-breaking study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have countered such objections, arguing that it is precisely as a ‘social phenomenon’ that the body acquires its significance: ‘the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and the constitution of the subject. The body is neither a purely natural given nor is it merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas.’³ Such a conception of the body opens, I feel, an exciting avenue of exploration for the field of Welsh writing in English – and, indeed, Welsh cultural studies as a whole. As Tony Conran notes, Welsh modernist writing in particular is strongly attracted to the grotesque, a genre in which the body is depicted as distorted, monstrous and hybrid. Representations of the body as grotesque, Conran argues, are a marker of wider social concerns, being symptomatic of the middle-class rejection of the social and moral imperatives of Welsh Nonconformity. Discussing Caradoc Evans’s *My People* (1915), a collection of short stories to which I will return later in this study, he comments:

The animus against the chapel culture of the *buchedd* is everywhere manifest, and is echoed in the grotesquerie of the language. Indeed,

modernism in Wales is most at home with the grotesque. It is there that modernism characteristically shows itself, in Saunders Lewis as much as in Caradoc Evans or Dylan Thomas. The nightmare of monstrosity underlies the middle-class rejection of the *buchedd*, the sense of being suffocated by its hypocrisy and narrowness.⁴

Such a view of the grotesque as marking a rejection of prevailing cultural norms is not uncommon in literary criticism. Philip Thomson, for example, in a widely disseminated account of the grotesque in literature, sees it as a genre commonly enacted 'as a violent clash of opposites', at its most prevalent 'in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation'.⁵ It is perhaps hardly surprising, therefore, that the grotesque continues to remain a dominant characteristic of much contemporary Welsh writing.

While the comments of Thomson and Conran bring to mind Gross's identification of the body as a site upon which meaning is both constructed and contested, they also, I believe, point to the inadequacy of a cultural criticism of the body which does not have recourse to psychoanalytic precepts. To observe, for instance, that the grotesque as a genre tends to emerge at times of cultural crisis is to raise questions about the nature of subjectivity and its corporeal foundations which the criticism of neither Thomson nor Conran is prepared to investigate adequately. Furthermore, as my discussion of Kristeva's concept of abjection will seek to clarify, terms such as 'opposites' and 'rejection' are far too simplistic to describe the complex and ambivalent psychical processes of which the grotesque is symptomatic. It is important to realise, for instance, that Welsh modernists were

themselves, in the main, products of – or *subjects to* – the discursive structures of Welsh Nonconformity – a fact reflected in the rich tapestry of biblical allusion, quotation and parodic reinscription which Evans constructs in *My People*. Thus, in rejecting Nonconformity, Welsh modernists were also in a sense *rejecting themselves*, their own pre-conditions of ‘being’ or selfhood. This is not to say, however, that my understanding of the body is one that ignores or downplays the body’s cultural determinants. As I will stress throughout my study, any investigation of the relationship between subject and body within Welsh writing in English must always be wary of universalising tendencies within psychoanalytic discourse, often serving as these do to ‘normalise’ dominant ideological values.

By combining psychoanalytic and cultural approaches to the body in this study, I intend to produce an historically informed account of the body in Welsh writing in English through an analysis of its role in the construction and contestation of identity at a cultural as well as individual level. In this account, the notion of subjectivity is to be understood in its fullest cultural sense, as expressive of the subject’s interpellation within the discursive (and thus ideological) structures of his or her society. By reading the body in Welsh literature in the light of theorists as varied as Kristeva, Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Homi Bhabha, I hope to expand the discursive boundaries of psychoanalysis, positioning its postulates (and accordingly modifying them) within the context of more culturally and historically aware accounts of Welsh literary practice. In exploring the body in this way, I hope also to contribute significantly, and in a potentially new and radical way, to the rapidly expanding critical literature on Wales concerned with exploring the construction of identity in a Welsh cultural context. The need for

such work in a multicultural, post-devolutionary Wales is widely recognised. As M. Wynn Thomas has stated, Welsh cultural criticism requires ‘new, subtle, ways of exploring the fluid relationship between cultures in Wales, with particular reference . . . to liminal, or boundary states’.⁶ There is no state more liminal, I would contend, than that of the interface between body and outer world, self and other, no place at which identity is more readily and frequently affirmed in the face of extinction. Despite frequent gestures towards theoretical discourse, however, and a widespread acknowledgement of the centrality of the grotesque in Welsh literary culture, the role of the body in the formation and contestation of identity has yet to be examined with any degree of adequacy or theoretical rigour within a Welsh context.⁷ It is a primary intention of this study to begin to rectify this area of critical neglect and hopefully provide the groundwork for subsequent investigations.

Many of the texts which I have chosen to explore for this purpose are the product of names that have acquired canonical status within Welsh writing in English: Caradoc Evans, Glyn Jones, R. S. Thomas, and Dylan Thomas. While it might justifiably be argued that such an approach perpetuates critical neglect of Wales’s women writers, I believe it is necessary to focus on these figures because it is they, above all others, who have been responsible for constructing the most culturally pervasive images of Wales and Welshness during the twentieth century. Moreover, the way in which they have done this has drawn almost obsessively upon representations of the bodily and the grotesque – a characteristic continued by many contemporary writers, most notably Niall Griffiths. This is not to say, however, that I ignore either women writers or representations of the female body

in my discussion. As I argue, from the time of the infamous education reports of 1847 (*Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* or ‘Treason of the Blue Books’), the female body became a privileged locus and transcoder of cultural and national debates within Wales, the ideological battleground upon which Welsh morality was both defended and maligned. It is within this historical context, I suggest, that the development of Welsh women’s writing needs to be located.

In producing an account of the body in Welsh writing in English, I feel it is necessary initially to establish a theoretical framework within which my subsequent literary readings will occur. In Chapter 1, therefore, I examine various ways in which the body has been theorised from both psychoanalytic and cultural perspectives, and attempt, through a reading of these perspectives alongside each other, to arrive at some tentative conclusions concerning the relationship between subject formation and the body. My main focus in this chapter is Kristeva’s avowedly psychoanalytic account of abjection, its principal features, and the ways in which these might be modified by more historical and culturally orientated accounts of the body, namely those of Bakhtin, Foucault and Bhabha. I conclude that while Kristeva’s account of subjectivity goes some way towards achieving a more culturally nuanced analysis of the signifying body than that normally found within psychoanalytic discourse, locating the subject’s fraught and complex relationship with its own corporeality within the context of differing cultural practices, her depiction of abjection remains (like psychoanalytic discourse in general) susceptible to the charge of presenting a ‘normalising’ account of the subject. While abjection provides a useful model upon which to further our understanding of how social and cultural identities might be constructed, what is

required, I suggest, is an historically orientated account of the body that enables its cultural determinants to be identified and analysed more thoroughly.

Chapter 2 attempts just such an analysis of the body in the context of the 1847 Blue Books *Report . . . into the State of Education in Wales*. Generally regarded as one of the most significant events in nineteenth-century Welsh history, the publication of the Report provoked outrage in Wales for its searing indictment of Welsh morality, the parlous state of which it blamed on the prevalence of religious Nonconformity and widespread ignorance of the English language. The strength of feeling generated by the Report's publication provided a focal point for an insurgence of national pride and regeneration, centred in the main around Nonconformity and its political wing in the Welsh Liberal Party. However, the role of the body in this process has never to my knowledge been assessed. Using as a starting point Gwyneth Tyson Roberts's exhaustive linguistic analysis of the Report in *The Language of the Blue Books* (1998), I demonstrate how the ideological motivations behind the Report operated on a textual level to condemn the Welsh working class as immoral – a judgement based, I argue, on the failure of this class to conform to bourgeois codes of bodily behaviour and restraint. Noting the ambivalence towards Welsh culture at the heart of Wales's late nineteenth-century national revival, I conclude that the dominant values of this revival reflected the ideological values and assumptions of the Report itself, its particular investment in the body as morally, nationally and socially significant. From its conception, the Welsh Nonconformist Nation was fundamentally compromised by its mimetic dependency upon the dominant values and attitudes of the middle-class England it ostensibly opposed.

Chapter 3 begins my literary explorations of the body by way of a reading of *My People*, a notorious collection of short stories by a man commonly regarded as the ‘founding father’ of Anglophone Welsh literature, Caradoc Evans. Within the fictional setting of Manteg, Evans attacks mercilessly the Nonconformist myth of the rural, cultured *gwerin*, constructing his own anti-myth of a bestial, carnally-minded peasantry ruled over by a grasping, Nonconformist priesthood – an assault that provoked outrage from Welsh Nonconformists, who saw in *My People* a repetition by one of their own of the lies and calumnies of 1847. As I argue, however, Evans is himself implicated in the same discursive/ideological structures he is attempting to reject, striking in *My People* a prophetic pose deeply indebted to biblical (and specifically Nonconformist) modes of discourse. Evans’s ambivalent relationship with Nonconformity – his positioning within what he is attempting to reject – is most readily apparent, I stress, in his use of the grotesque, a genre which acts as a symbolic but inherently problematic marker of his sense of revulsion and disgust. By analysing Evans’s depiction of Welsh Nonconformity as bestial and corrupt, I illustrate how Evans is himself implicated in the same patriarchal oppression that he is seeking to overthrow; his attack on Nonconformity, I conclude, reinforces the same categories of disgust and disavowal as those upon which Nonconformist identity had itself been established.

Caradoc Evans is widely regarded as the ‘father’ of Welsh writing in English, but criticism of the work of its best known son, Dylan Thomas, is indicative of the extent to which many critics continue to regard it as a young, ‘immature’ literature. Via a Foucauldian analysis of the construction of childhood

as a conceptual category, I argue in Chapter 4 that Thomas's critical and biographical reputation for childishness and immaturity works to disarm a threatening liminality in his work, displacing outside the boundaries of the normative self that which is perceived to threaten or undermine it. Personal attacks on Thomas's failings (in both life and work) are, I stress, embedded within a broader discursive framework, being indicative of the threat that cultural hybridity, and indeterminacy in general, pose to the autonomy and differentiation guaranteeing English bourgeois identity. Viewed from this perspective, critical condemnation of Thomas for his failure (or even refusal) to 'grow up' as both a poet and a man – his alleged personal and poetic irresponsibility – becomes an easy means of containing this threat through its displacement onto the category of the immature. To illustrate this argument, I conclude the chapter by discussing a number of poems from Thomas's first collection, *18 Poems* (1934). The poems in this collection, I note, often privilege sound over sense, destabilising the social contract between signifier and signified through a playful foregrounding of language's materiality. Crucially, this destabilisation of language is often accompanied by a strong emphasis upon the bodily and the physical: attacking the arbitrary dictates of cultural and social convention, Thomas resorts almost instinctively to the chaotic plenitude of the grotesque body. It is this conjunction of the asemantic materiality of language and the body that works to undermine normative conceptions of identity and selfhood in his poetry.

The principal focus of Chapter 5 is a discussion of R. S. Thomas's imaging of Wales and Welshness in his nationalist poetry of the 1960s and '70s. This is preceded, however, by a discussion of R. S. Thomas's 'adoption' by a Welsh-

language intelligentsia, a group of writers and critics who have used Thomas as a point of reference by which to distance or exclude other English-language writers (such as Dylan Thomas) whose loyalties towards Wales are of a more dubious nature. Among Welsh-language critics, it is noted, there has been a tendency since the time of Saunders Lewis to image Wales's Anglophone culture in terms of the abject body; as injury, wound, decay and corruption. In the post-war decades, I argue, the attitudes of this Welsh-language intelligentsia came to be internalised by a number of influential poets writing in English, proponents of a so-called 'poetry of exile' anticipated and exemplified by R. S. Thomas himself. In a consideration of his nationalist poetry, it is noted that Thomas's despair at the erosion of Welsh-language culture is registered via a discourse of the body in which the anglicisation of Wales is imaged in terms of decay, mutilation and corruption. In the most bitter of his poems, Wales itself is described as little better than a corpse. In reading Thomas, however, I stress the degree to which his strongest invective is reserved for himself: excluded by his anglicised upbringing from the Welsh poetic tradition, Thomas is himself part of the same 'abject' culture that he is striving to reject.

After two chapters that focus principally on poetry, Chapter 6 turns to the novel in Welsh writing in English. Drawing upon Bakhtin's distinction between poetic and novelistic discourses, this chapter explores potential connections between heteroglossia and the grotesque in two texts from different periods in Wales's literary history, Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village* (1956) and Niall Griffiths's *Grits* (2000). Reading these two novels side by side, I argue that the heteroglossic proliferation of language in south Wales during the early twentieth century anticipated in its effects more general developments in

contemporary Western culture, most notably the destabilising of traditional explanatory narratives by the clash of incompatible linguistic registers and discourses. During the course of the chapter, I illustrate the equally ambivalent but ultimately very different ways in which Jones and Griffiths's novels respond to this collapse of authoritative meaning. Despite their differences, however, depictions of the grotesque and abject body in both novels register an uneasy mix of liberated exhilaration and nihilistic terror reflective of a society in which stable authoritative meaning is no longer available.

In Chapter 7, I examine the problems faced by Welsh women in acquiring an independent and specifically female identity. Locating my discussion within the context of the 1847 Report, I trace the process by which the 'purity' of the female body became a metonym for wider social and moral concerns within Wales, the means by which cultural and national integrity might be evaluated and judged. Noting the abjection of women's sexuality from their bodies, I turn to Margiad Evans as one 'first generation' Anglo-Welsh writer whose elective Welshness allowed her to overcome the cultural prohibitions surrounding discussion of the female body in Wales. Via a discussion of her first full-length novel, *The Wooden Doctor* (1933), I show how Wales (ironically) came to represent for Evans freedom from the constraints and restrictions of her native bourgeois English society, somewhere her sexuality could express itself openly without sense of the abject. While noting the colonial implications of such an imaging of Wales, I conclude the chapter by suggesting a number of parallels to Evans's discovery of an identity on the far side of the Welsh/English border in Rachel Trezise's recent novel, *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* (2000). Exploring the impact of unemployment, family

breakdown, and economic deprivation through the eyes of a Rhondda girl growing up during the 1980s and '90s, Trezise's novel illustrates the difficulties faced by many women in Wales of establishing a coherent sense of self and identity within a society that continues to code the female body as abject. For Trezise, I note, it is England that, for a while at least, seems to offer freedom and escape from the 'goldfish bowl' of the Rhondda.

¹ Elizabeth Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 81, 85.

² Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), p. 10.

³ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 192.

⁴ Tony Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 113. Idiosyncratically, Conran uses the term *buchedd* – more accurately translated as 'life' or 'way of living' – as a synonym for Welsh Nonconformist culture.

⁵ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 11.

⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 50.

⁷ However, the link between the use of a grotesque style and a 'displaced, hybrid location' is one which has been made (albeit in passing) with regard to Dylan Thomas's poetry. See John Goodby and Christopher Wigginton, ' "Shut, too, in a tower of words": Dylan Thomas' modernism', in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (eds.), *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 101.

1

Theorising the Body: Reading Kristeva's Theory of Abjection through Bakhtin, Foucault and Bhabha

One way of understanding the ambiguous processes of identity formation relating to the body is through Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection: the ambivalent process described in *Powers of Horror* in which elements that cannot be assimilated by the self, but are nevertheless constitutive of that self (the abject), are expelled and disavowed. As I will illustrate in this chapter, Kristeva's account of abjection constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the way in which the subject is shaped through its fraught and complex relationship with its own corporeality; moreover, her analysis offers a rich and radically different way of exploring the ambivalencies, disavowals and displacements attendant not only upon the formation and maintenance of individual identity but of social identities more generally. However, it is not my intention merely to summarise Kristeva's account of abjection, but to read this account through and against other critical conceptions of the body so as to interrogate the avowedly psychoanalytic perspectives underpinning the Kristevan model of identity formation. In particular, I will argue that while Kristeva's theory of abjection succeeds in siting (and consequently modifying) psychoanalytic postulates within a socio-historical context, her depiction of abjection remains (like psychoanalytic discourse in general) susceptible to the charge of presenting a 'normalising' account of the subject, positing the culturally specific as universally valid in a way that is potentially condemnatory of those who deviate from this norm. After summarising

her theory of abjection, I will move towards a critique of Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to the development of subjectivity by reading her work against that of three more culturally orientated theorists: Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault and Homi Bhabha. In doing this, I intend to demonstrate the importance of abjection as a framework within which the construction of social and cultural identities can be better understood, but also to stress the need for Kristeva's psychoanalytic understanding of signifying practices to engage more fully with cultural, historical and sociological accounts of the body.

Kristevan Abjection

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes how the expulsion and disavowal of abject material (abjection) separates the self from what it is not (or rather refuses to be), a process that establishes the defining subject/object dichotomy foundational of both individual and collective identity. Crucially, this process is a corporeal one, demarcating the limits of the 'clean and proper' body through somatic responses of revulsion and disgust in order to exclude that (such as bodily waste) which would threaten its integrity, thus destroying the illusion of a unified, autonomous subjectivity. However, because the abject *is* part of this self/body, it cannot be so readily disposed of. Indeed, the very act of abjection implicates the subject in the thing which it is attempting to reject. As Elizabeth Gross puts it, '[this waste] can never be definitively and permanently externalized: it *is* the subject; it *cannot* be completely expelled'.¹ The abject can thus never be safely consigned to the category of *object*, but continues to transgress the boundaries separating subject

from object, self from other. Moreover, the very act of expelling the abject is in itself testimony to the frailty of the defining subject/object opposition. The expulsion of abject otherness is thus both what establishes the illusion of an autonomous unified self *and* what reveals the fragility, porosity and fundamental instability of that self; the subject both *abjects* and is *made abject* in the same ambivalent motion.

In her account of abjection, Kristeva identifies three basic types relating to food, the excremental, and the maternal/feminine body. The most archaic form of abjection occurs in relation to the infant child's loathing and expulsion of food. Using the example of the revulsion invoked by the skin on the surface of milk, Kristeva argues that the rejection of food, and disgust for certain types of food, occur because the child identifies what it is given to eat with a movement across its own corporeal limits – a movement which violates the boundary separating itself from both the world in general and its mother in particular. This is especially the case for substances (such as the skin of milk) whose frailty and ambivalence readily signify a transgression of the boundary between inner and outer, self and other. The vomiting and spitting out of food such as milk thus constitute a symbolic act of separation, a refusal to reciprocate and acknowledge the demands of parental love: ‘“I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it’ [*PH*, 3]. However, in its rejection of its corporeal debt to its parents, the child's retching of food marks, paradoxically, a movement *towards* the symbolic order which parental authority represents; the child expels *itself* at the same time as it rejects its mother: ‘But since the food is not an “other” for “me”, who am only in their desire, I expel

myself, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*. . . . "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death' [*PH*, 3]. This first instance of abjection provides the blueprint for the subsequent experience of entry into the symbolic order, a process which both establishes identity – causing the child literally *to be* as a subject, to exist as an 'I' – while simultaneously resulting in a loss of 'self' by the necessary adoption of pre-existing subject positions. To enter into language is to experience the alienation of abjection, to find one's Self by losing one's Self and becoming an Other. 'I' can only *be like* somebody else, 'an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be' [*PH*, 10].

The abject is never safely discarded, however, and continues to exist as both a pre-condition of subjectivity (that which the subject must define itself against) and as an ever present threat to the stability and integrity of this subjectivity. Indeed, symbolic identity can only be stabilised by 'an unshakable adherence' to transcendental signifiers such as 'Religion, Morality, Law' [*PH*, 16], by an absolute belief in their claims to a knowledge and meaning outside of and not subject to the normal laws of *différance* governing language. Such belief is persistently threatened, however, not only by the self-reflexive linguistic play of literature, but by the sensory experiences of day to day life which continually encroach upon the subject's borders, confronting it with the fragility of its corporeal existence. Thus, the sight of refuse, excrement, corpses and the like (which together comprise Kristeva's second category of abjection relating to the body and its waste) provokes a retching symptomatic of a desire to separate from and disown such objects – a somatic response which, nonetheless, is

simultaneously indicative of an inability to separate completely and relate to these objects *as objects*, sealed off from the autonomous bounded self:

[R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part [sic] of death.² There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. [PH, 3]

Most horrifying of all bodily wastes is the corpse:

the most sickening of wastes, [it] is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object. . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. [PH, 3-4]

The corpse is the ultimate reminder of the frailty of being, the powerlessness of the 'I' or ego to maintain control over its own body and protect itself from the relentless assault of organic decay.

To Kristeva, however, such 'excremental' abjections, relating to the body and its waste, are merely a screen for the most fundamental abjection of all, that of

the corporeal link between mother and child. While the excremental is a threat to identity which is ostensibly *external*, the maternal, and its signifier, menstrual blood, is a threat which emerges from within identity itself:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. [*PH*, 71]

Menstrual blood is a reminder of the corporeal connections with the maternal body which the child must disavow in order to achieve a stable subject position. To enter the realm of the symbolic – a realm predicated upon the separation from and exclusion of the feminine/maternal – the child's pre-Oedipal identification with its mother's body must be thrust aside and abandoned. As Kristeva argues, 'Symbolic identity presupposes the violent difference of the sexes' [*PH*, 100]. Thus, regardless of his or her biological sex, the subject is always 'male', *subject to* a masculine language which embodies the paternal within the Oedipal complex. The abject, by contrast, is identified with the feminine and the maternal, the archaic, unsignifiable mother who must be excluded, rejected and 'othered' in order initially to establish and subsequently to fix the borders of symbolic identity. Such stability is threatened, however, by the very process in which linguistic subjectivity

is established, for to become a subject is *to abject oneself*, one's pre-linguistic identification with the maternal body, and from henceforth to endure a lack which language can never entirely fill and which always threatens to destabilise the borders of linguistic experience and identity.

Importantly, this latter abjection – that of the maternal body – is regarded by Kristeva as initiating the logic upon which all other instances of abjection are predicated. This is made clear by Kristeva's analysis of the relationship between taboo and abjection in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. Through an analysis of the logic of separation and purity which informs all the biblical taboos relating to food and the body, Kristeva demonstrates how abjection within Leviticus is symptomatic of a cultural fear of the maternal body and the loss of differentiation which it represents. Thus, argues Kristeva, the maternal impurity which the Bible ascribes to menstruation and childbirth (in Leviticus 12) parallels in its logic of impurity and defilement the dietary abominations found elsewhere in Leviticus: abominations that forbid the eating of animals which do not conform to clear-cut taxonomic categories. Similarly, maintains Kristeva, the logic of impurity and defilement surrounding childbirth, and the male rite of circumcision, insist upon the necessity of separation from the maternal body in order to establish individual (male) identity. Levitical taboos therefore seek to suppress and contain the feminine/maternal through its designation as unclean and impure, subordinating it in the process to the patriarchal law of the symbolic. As Kristeva puts it, 'It [the pure/impure mechanism] carries into the private lives of everyone the brunt of the struggle each subject must wage during the entire length of his personal history in

order to become separate, that is to say, to become a speaking subject and/or subject to Law' [*PH*, 94].

As Kristeva's discussion of abjection in relation to Old Testament taboos suggests, an avowedly psychoanalytic perspective is coupled in her account with a keen concern for the logic informing specific cultural practices. Indeed, throughout *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva attempts to locate (and consequently modify) psychoanalytic postulates within the context of a variety of signifying practices, from the Hindu caste system of India to the modernist literature of Western Europe. Though often couched in the universalising assumptions of psychoanalytic terminology, Kristeva's account of subject formation thus constitutes a major intervention in cultural debate, her development of the concept of abjection suggesting, as Gross observes, that 'the discursive structure and all representational systems are a kind of sublimated corporeality which cannot be acknowledged as such'.³ It follows from this, I would argue, that the construction of cultural or group identities is itself informed by the logic of abjection, the attainment of a collective identity by the subject requiring first the jettisoning of all elements that are incompatible with this identity: elements which, in order for the subject to 'belong', must be deposited on the far side of a border separating self from other. It is no coincidence, for example, that the Other of colonial discourse is often both feminised and the possessor of qualities – bestial, immoral, profligate – which the normative self (the dominant colonising group) must deny and displace. As Judith Butler remarks, the movement from inner to outer characteristic of the abjection model is also 'the mode by which Others become shit'.⁴ However, while Kristeva is keen to emphasise the role of abjection within cultural practice, she continues to

privilege the individual as her site of inquiry, and does not expand her analysis to an exploration of the role which abjection might play in the construction and demarcation of social and cultural identities. This, I feel, is a major omission in Kristeva's account of abjection, for if the subject is to be investigated in terms of its corporeal signification, then it needs also to be placed within the discursive histories of its particular body's social production. The body, in short, should be revealed as a historical (and thus potentially contestable) construction; its 'abjects' the product of contingent social forces. In the remainder of this chapter, I will therefore proceed to reassess Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of the body through a reading of her work from three very different theoretical perspectives: those of Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault and Homi Bhabha.

Bakhtin and the Grotesque

Kristeva's concern with disgust as a marker of boundaries between inside and outside is interesting to compare with Bakhtin's account of the grotesque, which he defines in *Rabelais and His World* as 'that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines' [*RW*, 316]. To Bakhtin, like Kristeva, the grotesque is where the body meets the world, where the boundaries between inner and outer, self and other, dissolve and break apart. In contrast to Kristeva, however, Bakhtin sees the suppression of the grotesque in dominant modes of cultural discourse not in terms of any psychoanalytic law, but as a historical phenomenon intimately connected with the development and rise to power of a European bourgeoisie. From the seventeenth century onwards, Bakhtin argues, the

grotesque, previously a highly visible generic form in European literature, became increasingly marginalised and denigrated in officially sanctioned discourse, 'eliminated, hidden, or moderated' [*RW*, 320] within the literature of the bourgeoisie and surviving as a living force only among the peasant cultures of Europe. Within the new bourgeois culture, the body was no longer celebrated for its protrusions and orifices, its signs of openness to other bodies and the world, but acquired 'an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality' [*RW*, 320]. It is precisely such an individuality, of course, that the mechanism of abjection exists to protect. Reading Kristeva through Bakhtin, it is thus possible to argue that the strong concern which Kristeva displays for the plight of the individual subject confronting the abject is deeply embedded within bourgeois culture, which, throughout its history, has always sought to contain the body and render it presentable. Bakhtin's account of the historical formation of the grotesque body as the antithesis of what he terms the 'classical' body – 'an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual' [*RW*, 320] – therefore serves to problematise the universalising tendencies in Kristeva's work, forcing us to re-examine the abject as the product of a particular historical process, the negating Other of the bourgeois social formation.

The very different perspective informing Bakhtin's account is most strikingly apparent in his perception of the grotesque body not as an object of horror or disgust, but as an unreservedly positive force for change. To Bakhtin, the point of contact between inner and outer, self and other, is a privileged, almost redemptive space in which life and death are conjoined and reconciled, and where

‘new bod[ies]’ – which for Bakhtin are always social bodies – are continually being formed at the margins of the old:

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. [*RW*, 317]

The self for Bakhtin is always symbolically defined in terms of its corporeal representation, which delimits that self, marking it off from other selves. His concern is thus not for the boundary between symbolic and pre-symbolic, being and non-being (a boundary which is necessarily artificial in that it is constructed by discourse in order to defend a particular socio-cultural order), but with the unstable divisions, the ideological borders, that bisect and fragment the social body itself, and whose liminality provides the motive force for the production of new social selves. In striking contrast to Kristeva, Bakhtin is thus opposed to what the latter would term the successful abjection of bourgeois culture, with its construction of a ‘naturalised’ body, finished and complete, sealed off from contact with other bodies and the external world. Rather, his concern is for the transgressive and the grotesque, for ‘[t]hat which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off’, thereby highlighting the pocked and uneven surfaces of a body which bourgeois culture seeks to close and conceal [*RW*, 320].

Of course, it could be argued that Bakhtin exaggerates the extent to which the grotesque body was expurgated from within bourgeois culture, and underestimates in the process the degree to which the literature of the bourgeoisie questions that class's ideological assumptions and cultural givens. It would perhaps be truer to state that it was the critical discourse *on* canonical literature which both constructed the notion of the canon as a 'body' of writing of universal value and validity, and presented each text in this canon in terms of its unity, as an organic whole complete and uniquely individual while retaining universal significance (a classic example being the organicist ideology of F. R. Leavis).⁵ Nevertheless, Bakhtin's general point is a valid one, and is further enforced by his analysis of bourgeois manners, the social distinctions between the 'correct' and 'improper' which permeate the rules governing both linguistic relations with others and general etiquette:

Good education demands: not to place the elbows on the table, to walk without protruding the shoulder blades or swinging the hips, to hold in the abdomen, to eat without loud chewing, not to snort and pant, to keep the mouth shut, etc.; in other words, to close up and limit the body's confines and to smooth the bulges. [*RW*, 322 fn.]

Such attempts to 'limit the body's confines' are symptomatic of the effort to sustain an autonomous subjectivity, an illusory 'natural' self, stable, unified, and purged of heterogeneity – of a process, in short, which closely parallels Kristeva's account of abjection. Indeed, the importance of received pronunciation as a marker

of class status in English culture provides additional support for Bakhtin's characterising of bourgeois manners. By limiting the inflexions of the voice, for example, cultural practices such as elocution lessons seek to expel evidence of heterogeneity by containing the voice within strictly delimited boundaries. Moreover, in keeping with Kristeva's analysis, this abjection of the body from the voice constructs a subject who only becomes 'himself' by becoming like others, through an identificatory mimesis. This connection between bourgeois speech and the abjected heterogeneity of the body suggests, in addition, the intimacy of Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body with what he describes elsewhere as heteroglossia, the proliferation of language into conflicting socio-ideological discourses all working to undermine the establishment of stable linguistic meaning or a common unitary language.⁶ Both heteroglossia and the grotesque, for instance, seek to subvert and disrupt the linguistic stability of the 'finished' bourgeois body, and thus work to prise open its sealed orifices, the smooth surfaces of its complacent, self-contained world.⁷

Both Bakhtin and Kristeva, then, are concerned with those liminal or hybrid states where the impenetrable surface of the symbolic body breaks down, where the individual self is problematised, and where human traits are transformed and become animalistic.⁸ They approach their subject matter, however, from very different perspectives: the one psychoanalytic and defensive, concerned for a subject who is at the same time uniquely individual and universally representative; the other materialist and revolutionary, seeking out the potential for social change and transformation from a historical critique of the grotesque body. It is important, moreover, not to conflate the abject with the Bakhtinian grotesque as if the two

terms are synonymous. What is commonly described as grotesque, for example, is merely symptomatic of the process Kristeva terms abjection. As she stresses, 'It is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' [*PH*, 4]. The grotesque is thus just one generic symptom of the abject, and the limitation of Bakhtin's study is its failure to move beyond the grotesque and identify similar processes at work in other socially transgressive phenomena. Like the grotesque, for instance, the category of the perverse (as will be made clear in my discussion of Foucault's work) also disrupts and transgresses the symbolic system of difference on which bourgeois social/sexual identity is constructed: perversion, as Kaja Silverman argues, 'subverts many of the binary oppositions upon which the social order rests: it crosses the boundary separating food from excrement (coprophilia); human from animal (bestiality); life from death (necrophilia); adult from child (pederasty); and pleasure from pain (masochism)'.⁹

The strength of Bakhtin's study, however, lies both in its wider social application of the grotesque (which can be extended to the abject), and in its inherently more radical (if often utopian) approach to the social and political possibilities afforded by the opening up of the self to the world. Indeed, for Bakhtin, an openness to the grotesque offers limitless possibilities to the subject, an infinite expansion of selfhood into the realm of the Romantic sublime:

[T]he grotesque body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos . . . it is directly related to the sun, to

the stars. . . . This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe. [*RW*, 318]

Kristeva's abject, on the other hand, threatens to crush the subject by its 'weight of meaninglessness' [*PH*, 2], to dismantle the borders of the self so that 'I' am not. If, for Kristeva, the abject is always 'edged with the sublime', the sublime is nevertheless relegated to the role of a defence mechanism, a form of sublimation which acts as a safety valve for the abject: 'Through sublimation,¹⁰ I keep it under control' [*PH*, 11]. While for Bakhtin the grotesque provides an exciting opening out of the self to the material world, abjection for Kristeva enables the subject's necessary closure to that world.

Indeed, Kristeva's main concern is with the maintenance of autonomous subjectivity; she sees in the abject not the possibilities of symbolic realignment and transformation, but the threat of oblivion, of the death of the symbolic subject. Her approach is at times inherently conservative, equating 'the survival of both group and subject' [*PH*, 68] with the achievement of a static, unified sense of self – that is, with successful abjection. This radically different emphasis from that of Bakhtin is partly explainable by Kristeva's typically psychoanalytic concern with the individual as expressive of a universally valid typology, a concern which always threatens to condemn psychoanalysis to the status of a 'normalising' discourse. This is not to say that she is unaware of the social. Abjection, she states, 'is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level' [*PH*, 68], and throughout *Powers of Horror* she traces abjection

within the contexts of different socio-historical settings. This tracing of historical and cultural difference is always subordinated, however, to the universally applicable: ‘the general, logical determination that underlies anthropological variants . . . and evinces a specific economy of the speaking subject, no matter what its historical manifestations may be’ [*PH*, 68]. While cultural identity is thus very much a peripheral concern to Kristeva, her work nevertheless provides tantalising fragments of undeveloped ideas which might be fruitfully combined with a more Bakhtinian analysis. Her definition of the abject, for example, as that ‘not . . . integrated with a *given* system of signs’ [*PH*, 14; my emphasis] implicitly suggests the cultural specificity of the abject. If what is abject for one society is not for another, it follows that the abject does not threaten the symbolic order in itself, but rather threatens to redefine the symbolic or discursive values of a particular cultural community. It is a threat that emerges from *within* the symbolic order – not from any impossible outside – and is opposed not to the ‘I’ in itself, but to the particular ideological values embodied by that pronoun. It threatens to transform ‘I’, and what ‘I’ am, by, in Judith Butler’s words, ‘redescr[ib]ing those possibilities that *already* exist, but exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible’ [original emphasis].¹¹

The abject can thus be characterised as the element within linguistic discourse which disrupts, undermines, and contradicts that discourse: an ‘object’ that can neither be successfully assimilated nor totally excluded, and which retains the potential to change radically the subject’s sense of self. As my reading of Bakhtin illustrates, a concept of the abject in Western bourgeois society has often overlapped with that of the grotesque body, a body which disrupts the sense of

unified individuality central to bourgeois ideology. The suppression of this body – its successful abjection – therefore serves to cement a bourgeois sense of self and individuality in a manner which leaves Kristeva's account of abjection open to the charge of political conservatism. As Hal Foster asks, 'If a subject or a society abjects the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation?'¹² Arguably, then, abjection is no more than a 'normalising' mechanism, a means of expelling the abject Other in order to assert all the more strongly the supremacy of the normative bourgeois self. Indeed, the abject is an essential element in maintaining the status quo in that it is what the normative self must always define and differentiate itself against. However, it is the inability of the self to differentiate itself sufficiently or completely – to ever transform the abject into an *object* – that continues to constitute both the subversive threat and liberating potential of the abject.

Constructing the Abject: Power and Discourse in Foucault

The notion of abjection as 'a regulatory operation' is worth comparing with the critique of psychoanalysis which Michel Foucault provides in the opening volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault's account is an historicising one which strives to place the emergence of psychoanalysis during the nineteenth century within the context of the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie: an hegemony, he argues, which inflected all 'scientific' and social discourses and whose aim was the construction of the normative Western subject in its own bourgeois image. While Foucault sees this process as taking place primarily through the invention of a discourse of sexuality, it is interesting to note that, like Bakhtin, he views the

representation of the body *in toto* as crucial to an understanding of this construction of bourgeois identity. Foucault argues that the stable, unified, homogeneous self, constructed through a specific representation of the body, enabled the bourgeoisie to differentiate themselves from others by designating all that lay outside this specific, 'individualised' body as taboo and improper – what Kristeva would term abject. In contrast to Bakhtin, however, Foucault sees this development of class identity not in the negative terms of a sealing off or retreat from the bodily, but as an actively constructive process that stridently asserted its own sense of self and body: 'it [the bourgeoisie] provided itself with a body to be cared for, protected, cultivated, and preserved from the many dangers and contacts, to be isolated from others so that it would retain its differential value' [HS, 123].

While Foucault's conclusions are thus strikingly similar to those of Bakhtin – that repression serves the political ends of the bourgeoisie – Foucault's analysis takes Bakhtin's critique one step further. To Bakhtin, repression, while a peculiarly bourgeois phenomenon, is still repression in that *it suppresses a body that is already there*. Where his analysis differs from psychoanalytic accounts is in its delineation of this repression as historically contingent and class-based rather than a universally applicable 'fact' of human life, and in its removal of sexuality from its central position within psychoanalysis to just one of a number of phenomena constituting the grotesque body. Foucault, on the other hand, sees not only the repression of the body but its active discursive production: in other words, the body has to be produced before it can be repressed. Thus, applying Foucault's insights to abjection, we can say that the abject is not just *there*, but is actively constructed by the bourgeoisie in order to be expelled, thereby affirming the

boundaries of its normative self. Indeed, in Foucault's account, the bourgeois body was manipulated and controlled through an incitement to discourse, an encouragement to speak about itself, '[to equip] itself with . . . a technology of sex' and '[to create] its own sexuality . . . forming a specific body based on it' [HS, 123, 124]. A discourse called sexuality thus emerged – in which psychoanalysis played a central role – that actively produced and categorised alternative sexualities (which were designated as perverse) in order to define the normative bourgeois self in terms of its difference from these other (abject) sexualities: for the first time in history one's sexual predilections became the basis for social identity. If, however, this production of abject/perverse sexualities served to affirm the bourgeois self, it simultaneously threatened to undermine that self by producing (in opposition to its normalising compulsions) an incitement to transgress and explore new subjective possibilities through the construction of new social/sexual identities. Thus, the production of abject/perverse sexualities enabled the assertion of 'reverse discourses' by, for example, homosexuals, who often demanded their legitimacy using the same categories and vocabulary by which they were disqualified [HS, 101]. In other words, the process of abjection helped construct what it sought to exclude.¹³

In Foucault's account, then, what might be termed the abject, far from being unassimilable by the symbolic, is in fact perceived as a necessary construct of a 'normalising' discourse (of which psychoanalysis is an integral component). While Foucault does not concern himself with an analysis of disgust, it is clear from his account of the historical construction of perverse sexualities that the normalising discourse which produces these sexualities creates (and subsequently

expels) an abject Other that is at once both desirable and repellent, and that simultaneously threatens to reveal the instability and 'unnaturalness' of the normative self as it enables the assertion of that self. Thus, by locating the abject within discourse – and, indeed, as a construct of discourse – Foucault redefines the terms by which its dual and ambivalent role as both threat and protector to the static, unified self can be understood. As he argues:

[D]iscourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. [HS, 101]

Foucault's conception of power here seems indistinguishable from the normalising compulsions of the normative self, whose discourse both produces the abject Other as a means of demarcating its own borders, and the resistance of this Other, its threat to the culturally dominant order. Resistance to a legitimating discourse thus always occurs from within that discourse, '[it] is never in a position of exteriority' [HS, 95].

If the abject Other, however, exists only as a construct of the normative self, it can nevertheless, through the deployment of a resisting reverse discourse, attain for itself both agency and identity. This is significant, I would argue, because such a process comprises not only the construction of a new subjectivity through a realignment of the dominant symbolic order, but as a consequence of this

discursive shift also constructs alternative abject Others. Moreover, such abject Others frequently include the very normative self whose legitimating discourse provided the original point of departure for this new oppositional identity. Paradoxically, this new identity must *abject itself* and deny its contiguity to what it ostensibly opposes: that normative 'self' which is now Other and abject, foundational yet inadmissible. As Samantha Pentony argues, 'abjection represents a revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being',¹⁴ and there are strong parallels between the construction of an oppositional group identity (be that sexual, class or national) and the beginnings of individual subjectivity described by Kristeva. Like Kristeva's vomiting child [*PH*, 3], for instance, which similarly expels itself in order to establish itself, a new oppositional identity or self can only *be like* somebody else; in order to construct a symbolic identity it must lose its definitional 'otherness' and articulate its 'being' through the already compromised realm of language. Constructed as it is by the discursive power of the normative self (as the child exists only in terms of parental desire), this oppositional identity must resist by using the language of that self – a language that, *for it*, constitutes alterity: '[the] Other who precedes and possesses me [us], and through such possession causes me [us] to be' [*PH*, 10]. Synthesising the ideas of Foucault and Kristeva, it is therefore possible to say that an oppositional identity is affirmed within the same discursive categories as the normative self/identity that it ostensibly opposes. Moreover, like this normative self, it constructs an identity through the same ambivalent motion of abjection, a motion which, while vigorously asserting the absolute difference between self and other, simultaneously reveals the extent to which the Other already inheres within, and is even foundational of, the self.

Resisting the Essential: Bhabha and Hybridity

While such oppositional identities, constructed via the deployment of a reverse discourse, may empower a subordinate group with the legitimation required to resist successfully the power of the dominant and normative social order, they nevertheless remain politically suspect, constructed as they are by the same essentialist fictions and binary oppositions by which they had hitherto been excluded. In constructing an identity via the normalising processes of abjection, for instance, subordinate groups may reproduce the same essentialised structures of 'normality' which they purport to resist, and in doing so risk transforming a discourse of liberation into a new discourse of domination. Such discourses engage in what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White term 'displaced abjection', by which they refer to the production of an internal differentiation within a subordinate culture whereby other subordinated groups that cannot be assimilated are excluded and denigrated:¹⁵ a process which, as Jane Aaron comments, is a common component in the assertion of a 'liberatory' national identity within many postcolonial societies. Within such societies, Aaron argues, declarations of cultural pride paradoxically retain and intensify the patriarchal and homophobic social structures of the coloniser, which continue to provide the basis of cultural legitimation: 'It is as if the wounds inflicted on racial self-esteem during the colonizing process can only be healed by a continuing repression and denial of behaviour which the imperial culture once castigated as "barbaric"'.¹⁶ It is not only within postcolonial societies that such displacements can occur. As Jonathan Dollimore illustrates, the construction of an essentialised homosexual identity, while effective in 'naturalising' the status of homosexuality, also led on occasions

to the abjection of certain types of homosexual behaviour from within the 'authentic' homosexual self.¹⁷

The construction of oppositional identities, then, seems almost invariably to reproduce – and be contained by – the same discursive structures of domination and repression that it originally sought to resist, reinforcing through abjection the binary oppositions of 'them' and 'us' foundational of the social order. Such an analysis seems, initially at least, to be a pessimistic one, for if the language of liberation is necessarily contaminated by the discursive structures of repression that it seeks to overthrow, then it might be suggested that a truly successful political resistance – one which moves beyond the reinscription of dominant social structures – remains a utopian impossibility. I would suggest, however, that Homi Bhabha, in his influential text *The Location of Culture*, does provide one way in which such an assertion can be countered. While Bhabha does not explicitly analyse the grotesque or abjection, his conception of cultural hybridity as a politically destabilising and radically indeterminate force which emerges at the interface of colonial relations ('where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated' [LC, 34]) offers the potential for a far broader cultural understanding of abjection and the abject: an understanding which can be used to re-evaluate significantly (and in a politically radical manner) some of the normalising compulsions inherent within Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of identity. Indeed, Bhabha's assertion that 'in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid – neither the one thing nor the other' suggests immediately interesting parallels with abjection [LC, 33]. Like Bakhtin's grotesque or Kristeva's abject, Bhabha's hybridity threatens the stability and

integrity of normative symbolic identities; '[h]ybridity represents that ambivalent "turn" of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority. . . . [I]t is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures' [LC, 113]. Hybridity thus undermines the stability and naturalised status of the coloniser's identity through its elision of the identifying gap between self and other. Importantly, moreover, it offers a strategy of resistance to cultural domination 'in the very practice' of this domination. In the subjection of the colonised Other to the normalising discourses of the coloniser, the dominant and naturalised status of the latter is both vigorously asserted and fatally undermined, confronted with the instability and permeability of its boundaries – in a word, its own non-essentiality – in the very instance of its affirmation.

One way in which hybridity undermines the discursive authority of the colonial power is through a process which Bhabha terms *mimicry*, by which he refers to a rearticulation of the colonial power's cultural values in a way that subverts, estranges and deconstructs their naturalised, self-evident status. Indeed, unlike the mimesis of abjection – which seeks to disavow its dependence upon the Other and the inherence of that Other within the self – the strategy of mimicry actively foregrounds the alterity of selfhood. As Bhabha is at pains to stress:

What I have called mimicry is not the familiar exercise of *dependent* colonial relations through narcissistic identification so that, as Fanon has observed,¹⁸ the black man stops being an actional person for only the white man can represent his self-esteem.

Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Césaire describes as ‘colonization-thingification’¹⁹ behind which there stands the essence of the *présence Africaine*. [LC, 88; original emphasis]

Applied to a more general theory of identity than Bhabha’s specifically colonial analysis, the concept of mimicry therefore offers a strategy for eluding the reproduction of normative ideologies by oppositional identities: the mimetic logic of abjection which Bhabha terms ‘narcissistic identification’. Indeed, mimicry threatens the normative self not by opposing it through the construction of its own ‘authentic’ identity, but by the partial and incomplete repetition of the self’s own legitimating discourses, a repetition which ‘rearticulates presence in terms of its “otherness”, that which it disavows’ [LC, 91]. Thus, like the abject, the discourse of mimicry inhabits an indeterminate position which is at once both inside and outside the symbolic boundaries of the self; it is ‘a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them’ [LC, 89].

In their disruption of ‘identity, system, order’ [PH, 4], then, it would not be unfair to characterise hybridity and mimicry as closely akin to what Kristeva would term the abject. Indeed, like the Kristevan abject, the hybrid emerges in the very act of a cultural enunciation that seeks to fix and stabilise a ‘pure’, uncontaminated identity. Unlike Kristeva’s account, however, which opposes the abject to symbolism, to the ‘I’ itself [PH, 1], the threat of hybridity (as in Foucault’s account of the perverse) emerges from within symbolic discourse as the partial, incomplete, and *perverted* repetition of a normative cultural identity, a

repetition or *mimicry* which is at once both ‘resemblance and menace’ [LC, 86], and which ‘like the fetish . . . mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them’ [LC, 91]. The threat of the hybrid is therefore precisely *not* that of an essentialised oppositional identity, founded upon an imagined absolute difference from the dominant power/self, but of a mocking, parodic partial presence which works to undermine and deconstruct claims of authenticity and essence. Indeed, its threat lies in its transgression of the defining self/other dichotomy and its foregrounding of the fragility and permeability of fixed cultural identities. As Bhabha comments, the hybrid strategy of mimicry menaces normative identities through ‘the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory “identity effects” in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no “itself” ’ [LC, 90].

To Bhabha, then, hybridity is *a tactical position* from which political and cultural resistance can be offered, not simply the threat to the speaking subject which Kristeva ascribes to the abject. Indeed, Kristeva’s depiction of the abject in terms of rape, animalism and excrement [PH, 4, 12-13, 3] is a marker of her own position within the normalising discursive structures of psychoanalysis. As Bhabha argues, the terrifying menace of the hybrid – ‘*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*’ [LC, 86; original emphasis] – is always ‘displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body’ [LC, 92]. While Bhabha here is talking specifically about race, his analysis holds true in a more general sense as an accurate depiction of the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultural groupings, be they those of class, gender or ethnicity. As I have illustrated above,

the construction of cultural identity in the strictly modern and bourgeois sense of the term is predicated upon the construction of an homogeneous body and its differentiation from that – other ‘inferior’ cultural groupings – which lies outside this ‘body’. However, such an abjection confronts this ‘undifferentiated . . . body’ with its own pretence in the very act of its displacing affirmation; the monstrous hybrid returns to haunt a suppresser who is also its creator.

¹ Gross, ‘The Body of Signification’, in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, p. 91. My debt to Gross’s reading of Kristeva is general as well as specific.

² The phrase ‘on the part of death’ is not reducible to any one meaning. I can deduce three main interpretations: (i) ‘for death’ – i.e. this is what life has to suffer in the face of death; (ii) ‘on the point of death’ – i.e. this is what life has to suffer at the edge of its being (an interpretation which fits in with the succeeding adverbial ‘there’); and (iii) which also agrees with the succeeding adverb, ‘the “part” with death’ – i.e. what life withstands (its excremental waste products) as it splits or separates from death (the ultimate abject) in order to survive. See Roudiez’s ‘Translator’s Note’ [*PH*, viii] for Kristeva’s use of polysemy.

³ Gross, ‘The Body of Signification’, in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, p. 101.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 134.

⁵ For an analysis of the ideological values promulgated by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English literary criticism, see Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). In relation to abjection theory, it is interesting to note the tendency in Leavisite criticism to condemn certain writers (particularly among the Romantics) for their perceived effeminacy. For Charles Lamb’s treatment within this critical tradition, see Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 9-13.

⁶ See Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422.

⁷ For further discussion of the connections between the two, see Chapter 6 of the present study.

⁸ Compare, for example, Bakhtin – ‘the combination of human and animal traits is . . . one of the most ancient grotesque forms’ [*RW*, 316] – with Kristeva’s identification of certain aspects of the abject ‘with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*’ [*PH*, 12; original emphasis].

⁹ Kaja Silverman, ‘Masochism and Male Subjectivity’, in *Camera Obscura*, No. 17 (May 1988), p. 33. For a detailed account of the various strategies by which perversity undermines the social order, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Dollimore’s elaboration of what he terms ‘[t]he perverse dynamic . . . that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it opposes’ (p. 33), is particularly useful with regard to abjection theory.

¹⁰ Given the context of the passage, it seems clear that, as well as the standard English meaning of sublimation (‘the diversion of sexual energy into non-sexual activity’), Kristeva (or possibly her translator) is invoking the additional meaning of ‘to make sublime’. A remark by Victor Burgin – ‘the concept of the sublime may be the sublimation of a more violent fear’ – perhaps provides the most useful gloss on this passage (Victor Burgin, ‘Geometry and Abjection’, in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, p. 117). It is interesting that, in another context, Kristeva goes as far as to suggest that the sublime *is* abjection and is thus, to some degree, identified with the abject itself: ‘the sublime is this neither-subject-nor-object entity that I have called “abjection” ’ (Julia Kristeva,

Tales of Love [1983], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 368).

¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 148-9.

¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), p. 156.

¹³ Kristeva makes a similar point in relation to biblical abomination. The 'demoniacal' in Old Testament texts, she argues, is 'not at all autonomous but . . . intrinsic to and coiled within divine speech [. . .] an inescapable, repulsive, and yet *nurtured* abomination' [*PH*, 107; my emphasis]. However, Kristeva does not rule out the possibility of the demoniacal 'being actualized' and attaining autonomy [*PH*, 91].

¹⁴ Samantha Pentony, 'How Kristeva's theory of abjection works in relation to the fairy tale and post colonial novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*', *Deep South* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring 1996), <http://www.otago.ac.nz/DeepSouth/vol2no3/pentony.html>

¹⁵ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 19, 53.

¹⁶ Jane Aaron, 'Finding a voice in two tongues: gender and colonization', in Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (eds.), *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), p. 189.

¹⁷ See, for example, Dollimore's account of André Gide's attempts to 'authenticate' his homosexuality through an 'internal differentiation', displacing 'some at least of the social stigma of homosexuality' onto what he terms 'inverts' (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 54).

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. Charles Lam Markmann [1967] (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 109.

¹⁹ Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1955] (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 21.

2

Class, Nation and Corporeality in the 1847 Blue Books**Report**

The publication in 1847 of the Blue Books *Report . . . into the State of Education in Wales* (the term ‘Blue Books’ deriving from the colour of the bindings of Commissions of Inquiry reports) is generally agreed to have been one of the most significant events in the history of nineteenth-century Wales.¹ Indeed, while historians have differed in their interpretations of the Report’s significance, the lasting impression it made upon the history and politics of Wales, and the development of Welsh identity, have been almost universally acknowledged. In her ground-breaking study *The Language of the Blue Books*, Gwyneth Tyson Roberts argues that the attitudes embodied in the Report are still of extreme relevance today:

[I]ts publication marked a watershed in officially recognized images of the Welsh people and language, and of Welsh people’s images of themselves which they might wish to reject but could not ignore. It has, directly or indirectly, made a major contribution in the shaping of such images and attitudes towards what it meant and what it means to be Welsh, and as such has played a significant role in the process of construction of a modern Welsh identity. [BB, 3]

Certainly, the decision of the three Commissioners to exceed their original remits and pronounce moral judgement upon a whole people and culture was to have deep and lasting ramifications for Welsh politics and identity, not all of them negative. As Kenneth O. Morgan has shown, the publication of the Report incurred the wrath of Nonconformist Wales, stimulating the growth and development of a Welsh national consciousness by providing a focal point for an insurgence of national pride and regeneration which was to culminate eventually in the Liberal electoral landslide of 1868.² By this time, as Ieuan Gwynedd Jones agrees, the Blue Books Report had become 'an inspiration rather than a symbol of defeat, a weapon rather than an instrument of shame'.³ Indeed, the Report came to serve as an originating myth for the newly ascendant Welsh Nonconformist nation, a function emphasised by its sobriquet *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* ('The Treachery of the Blue Books'), with its punning allusion to another founding myth involving English/Saxon perfidy, *Brad y Cyllyll Hirion* ('The Treachery of the Long Knives') during the fifth century.⁴

However, not all historians have agreed with Morgan and Jones's largely positive interpretations of the Report's long-term effects. Gwynfor Evans, for one, has argued that the Report, while awaking 'the national political consciousness of the Welsh', also helped to consolidate negative attitudes towards the Welsh language and thus contributed enormously to the continuing advance of anglicisation.⁵ That the Report can produce two such diametrically opposed interpretations is in itself of considerable interest, suggesting the ambivalence of the processes of identity formation which it set in motion. Indeed, Gwyn A. Williams has described how the 'surge of national feeling' stimulated by the

Report was characterised by a considerable degree of ambiguity. Williams argues that while the Blue Books undoubtedly led to a revival of Welsh-language culture, this 'was essentially an English and largely middle-class-cum-populist culture translated and transmuted', embodying ideological values 'which in practice confirmed the status of the [Welsh] language as subaltern and subject'.⁶

Though the ambivalent attitudes embodied in this 'translated' culture provide one focus of this chapter, it is not simply my intention to rehearse yet again the arguments of Williams, Jones and others. Rather, I wish to use their valuable historical research (as well as Roberts's linguistic analysis of the Report itself) as the starting point for a more contentious argument: that the ambivalence towards Welsh culture at the heart of Wales's late nineteenth-century national revival was a reflection, at its most fundamental and foundational level, of a shift in the perception of the body and the ways in which it was coded and represented. This shift (with its extensive implications for Welsh perceptions of themselves and their identity) was, I believe, produced in part by the Report's condemnation of the Welsh working class for their failure to conform to bourgeois codes of bodily behaviour and restraint – a failure which, to the Report's Commissioners, demonstrated not only a lack of moral virtue but a corruption of the basic tenets underpinning British (and thus bourgeois) 'civilisation'. While control of the body was undoubtedly a concern of Welsh Nonconformist denominations prior to 1847, I will argue that it was the internalisation of the 1847 Report's ideological values and assumptions – its particular investment in the body as morally, nationally and socially significant – that enabled Welsh Nonconformity to construct its own bourgeois nation in the years that followed, a nation whose originating myth of

Brad y Llyfrau Gleision concealed its mimetic dependency upon the dominant values and attitudes of the middle-class England that it ostensibly opposed. Thus, ironically, Welsh Nonconformity's *Pura Wallia* owed a considerable debt to the moral and social values of bourgeois England, and in the process of its construction many cultural traditions which could not be assimilated with these values were suppressed or disavowed. If the Commissioners of the 1847 Report were keen to stress the links between Welshness and immorality, in the years after 1847 the representatives of Nonconformity were equally insistent on proving that a sense of morality (as defined by the Commissioners) was in fact a dominant characteristic of the Welsh people and nation. As I shall argue, however, the adoption by Welsh Nonconformity of the moral definitions enshrined within the Report involved not only the active internalisation of many of the values underpinning the production of Britishness, but helped to solidify, at the heart of the Nonconformist Nation, fundamentally ambivalent attitudes towards the Welsh language and its culture.

Contextualising the Report

As Linda Colley has shown, the early nineteenth century was a crucial period in the consolidation of a British national identity, as it overcame the definitional crisis brought about by the end of the Napoleonic wars. By the middle of the century the Otherness which Catholic France had represented, and which had hitherto defined the British collective self in terms of a beleaguered Protestantism, had been superseded by 'the triumphs, profits and Otherness of a massive overseas empire'.⁷

It was around this empire and its associated trade that British identity was increasingly constructed, thereby redefining the boundaries between a British collective self and its negating Other. However, such a redefinition of Britishness also affected profoundly the relationship between the various constituent cultures of Britain. During this period of unprecedented overseas expansion, it became an ideological necessity to locate difference outside Britain and not within it; historical and cultural differences had to be put to one side so that all in Britain could reap the rewards of participation in Britain's grand imperial project. In practice, this disavowal of internal British difference entailed an extension of core 'English' (that is bourgeois) values to all classes and linguistic groups in Britain – a process of cultural homogenisation, I would argue, contiguous with that of abjection, entailing as it did the exclusion and rejection of all that threatened the stability and unity of an inherently unstable, heterogeneous British self. Indeed, as I will illustrate, this construction of a unified British self followed an identical logic to the process of individual subject formation traced by Kristeva, being predicated upon the suppression of all that threatened to reveal the permeability of the bounded body/self. Such similarities were far from coincidental, as the existence of internal cultural difference (as the 1847 Report illustrates) was often conflated with the continuance of social and sexual customs deemed to be immoral precisely for their transgression of bourgeois bodily limits. As I will proceed to argue, the extension to the working class of bourgeois morality (and thus a bourgeois conception of the body) was an integral aspect of the construction of a British nationality, the flouting of the former being regarded as (potentially) a betrayal of the latter.

Although officially incorporated into the English kingdom since the 1536-43 Acts of Union, Wales remained, in terms of sentiment at least, largely unassimilated by this normative British self during the first half of the nineteenth century. Like the abject, Wales was at once both inside and outside constructions of British national identity; ostensibly a fully integrated part of a unified British nation state, it continued to be a region of distinctive cultural, linguistic and religious practices which were often perceived to threaten the stability, integrity and long-term progress of that state. Moreover, in recent years this threat had taken on palpable form, both in the frontier settlements of industrial south Wales – where new, highly volatile working-class communities were being formed largely outside the control and influence of the governing classes – and in rural Wales as well, where a deep-seated antipathy often existed between predominantly English-speaking Anglican landlords and their Nonconformist Welsh-speaking tenants. Violent social disturbances, for example, were characteristic of many areas of Wales into the 1840s, and major insurrections, such as those in Merthyr in 1831 and the Chartist attack on Newport in 1839, were only the most visible manifestations of a breakdown in the rule of British law. More long-term disturbances, such as the widespread rural unrest of the Rebecca Riots (1839-42), and the existence of secret organisations such as the Monmouthshire Scotch Cattle, demonstrated in equal measure the ineffectual nature of British rule in large areas of Wales, and the continuing adherence of many working-class communities (both rural and industrial) to their own codes of justice and punishment.⁸

To contemporary government observers, the link between such violent unrest and the existence in Wales of a distinctive language and culture was self-

evident. The latter, in fact, was often cited as a major barrier to the creation of loyal, obedient British subjects, and following each outbreak of unrest government and newspaper reports inevitably drew attention to the ‘problem’ of the Welsh language. A government report of 1844 into the Rebecca Riots, for instance, observed that the existence of the Welsh language and a widespread ignorance of English ‘is felt in a practical shape in the obstacles which it presents to the efficient working of many laws and institutions’ [quoted *BB*, 20]. Welsh was furthermore linked to poverty and a general lack of prosperity: an ignorance of English, stated another report of 1846, was ‘one of the great causes of the backward state of the Welsh part of the population’.⁹ This is an important comment, for it suggests how the Welsh language was perceived as excluding its speakers from participation in that key element of British imperial identity, economic trade. More sinisterly, however, Welsh was also portrayed as a language of plots and conspiracies, its very existence aiding and abetting those wishing to destabilise the British state. Following the Newport Rising, for instance, the *London Morning Chronicle*’s assertion that ‘in no part of the country could an organisation be formed, with so little interruption, as in a district where the lower orders speak almost universally a language unknown to the educated classes’¹⁰ typified a broader official response. Official observers were given further cause for misgiving by the adherence of the majority of Welsh people to various Nonconformist denominations. Nonconformity was mistrusted not only for its strong identification with Welsh culture and language, but also because of its democratic structure, its strongly populist and community orientated appeal. It was considered, for example, potentially dangerous and politically destabilising to encourage ordinary working-class people to debate contentious theological issues or participate in the election

of their ministers. Fundamental to this mistrust, though, was Nonconformist hostility towards the established Anglican Church, for the strong connections between Anglicanism and the institutions of state and monarchy meant that antipathy towards the former could easily be seen as dissatisfaction with the latter [BB, 31].

Welsh cultural difference was thus viewed by government as a barrier blocking the development of a unified British subjectivity. The task of government was to erase this difference and assimilate the Welsh into a normative Anglophone and Anglocentric British self: to make them willing participants in the project of Empire. In order to perform this task, the role of education was central, and it is significant that Matthew Arnold's (in)famous remark that 'it must always be the desire of a Government to render its dominions as far as possible homogeneous' was made in his official capacity as a school inspector for Glamorgan.¹¹ Indeed, the links between education, cultural assimilation, and a subservient population were all made by William Williams, Welsh-born MP for Coventry, in the parliamentary speech in which he proposed the establishment of the 1847 Report. Referring to recent outbreaks of social unrest in Wales, Williams asserted that 'the moral power of the schoolmaster was a more economical and effectual instrument for governing this people than the bayonet', and quoted from numerous official reports to argue that a population of loyal Britons in Wales could only be created through education [quoted BB, 24]. Significantly, he also contrasted the Welsh with the Scottish people, whose superior education, he claimed, had led to a swift recognition of the benefits of full participation in Britain's imperial project:

If the Welsh had had the same advantages for education as the Scotch [sic], they would, instead of appearing a distinct people, in no respect differ from the English: would it not therefore be wisdom and sound policy to send the English schoolmaster among them?¹²

From its conception, then, the avowed aim of the Blue Books Report was to assimilate the Welsh within a hegemonic Britishness, thus creating loyal British subjects (in both senses of the word) through the abjection of those markers of difference that made the Welsh *Welsh*.

Williams's attitudes concerning Wales, the Welsh language, and the role of education typified those of the ruling class in general. As Ieuan Gwynedd Jones has commented, 'there was nothing new in what Williams had to say . . . his argument was a distillation of facts, opinions and pleadings long made familiar in [previous] government publications'.¹³ Moreover, while the particular cultural role which education should play in Wales was unique, its general *modus operandi* was merely the logical extension of educational policy in England, which viewed the instruction of working-class children primarily as a means of constructing passive, disciplined working-class adults happy with their limited station in life. In short, working-class education throughout Britain was seen as a means of inculcating the poor with a sense of, and reverence for, the Holy Trinity of Church, King and Country, so that they would accept quietly and with religious resignation the political and social status quo. Education should certainly *not* encourage people to start thinking too much for themselves, or to begin analysing the political and

social system which kept them in subjection. As the ‘educationalist’ Reverend Andrew Bell commented:

It is not proposed that the children of the poor be educated in an expensive manner, or that all of them be taught to write and to cipher . . . there is a risk of elevating, by an indiscriminate education, the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour above their condition, and thereby rendering them discontented and unhappy in their lot. [quoted *BB*, 31-2]¹⁴

Indeed, far from being a lever to raise the working class to the levels of educational attainment and material prosperity enjoyed by their social ‘betters’, education was regarded as a means of maintaining social and economic power over the working class through their assimilation into the regulatory discourses of the bourgeoisie (as distinct from the bourgeoisie itself); its primary aim was thus to strengthen existing class distinctions while simultaneously eliminating the most threatening aspects of working-class alterity.¹⁵ To the bourgeoisie, the British working class was the object of a conflictual desire: while on the one hand their assimilation was required in order to strengthen the homogeneity of the British bourgeois nation, such assimilation also threatened the social (and bodily) differentiation guaranteeing bourgeois power. Moreover, the very compromise designed to negate this threat – the withholding of ‘an indiscriminate education’ – merely served to reinforce it, the use of education as a form of social control undermining its authoritative power and contradicting its rhetoric of personal responsibility and self-betterment. In advocating only a *partial* and limited

‘education’ for the working class, government officials ran the risk (as in colonial policy) of destabilising the foundations of their own linguistic legitimisation *and* of producing new, and potentially threatening knowledges, of bourgeois norms. It is hardly surprising, then, that working-class education was often regarded with mistrust by those in authority – even by those who were its strongest advocates. Dr James Kay-Shuttleworth, for example, the first secretary of the Committee of Council on Education, and a strong believer in the power of education to produce children who were ‘more docile, orderly and intelligent’, was nevertheless extremely sympathetic to the view that teaching the poor to read was ‘like putting the torch of knowledge into the hands of the rick burners’ [quoted *BB*, 38]. Thus while report after government report emphasised the need for greater education of the working class, such reports also expressed the constant fear of the ruling class that the express purpose of such education – the extension of state power (and thus Britishness) through the construction of normative working-class subjects – was always liable to inversion by and in the very act of its transmission.

However, within Wales itself, the debate over the extent to which the working class should be educated was complicated both by linguistic differences and a deep-seated fear amongst the ruling class that educational control was slipping into the hands of religious and even political subversives. Indeed, the connections drawn by many official reports and parliamentary speeches between social and political unrest and inadequate educational provision conceal the levels of unofficial and politically undesirable educational activity occurring in many industrialised regions of Wales. It is evident in a number of places throughout Seymour Tremenheere’s report of 1840, for instance, produced in the aftermath of

the Newport Rising, that the term 'educational provision' refers only to the kind of ideologically sound 'education' outlined by Bell and Shuttleworth above, and that alternative unofficial forms of education provided by the working class themselves were regarded as merely propagating ignorance, dissent and unrest [BB, 37].¹⁶ Sir Thomas Phillips's oblique reference in a memorial to Tremenhoe's committee, for example, to 'emissaries of disorganizing doctrines', whose teachings ensured 'that the children of this population should grow up ignorant, irreligious, corrupted and misled',¹⁷ makes it clear that some at least in industrial south Wales were receiving a very different type of education from that officially prescribed – or even that provided by the Sunday Schools. Indeed, as Ivor Wilks has shown, contrary to popular belief the Welsh language was the medium for a sizeable canon of secular political literature and discussion during the 1830s, and Welsh working-class leaders (most of whom were committed Chartists) maintained close contacts with the English working-class movements throughout this period.¹⁸ Working Men's Associations thus provided an alternative and separate educational domain dissociated from both Nonconformity and Anglicanism, and in the 1830s the ideological effects of this new educative sphere were felt in a growing political awareness amongst the Welsh working class. In the year prior to the ill-fated march on Newport, for example, Welsh Chartist leaders such as Dr William Price toured the south Wales coalfield 'to expound the ideas of Thomas Paine to the colliers in Welsh', while English radicals such as Henry Vincent were also active in the region.¹⁹ The 1847 Report (and the various educational reports that led up to it) should thus be seen as stimulated, at least partly, by a desire to wrest working-class education back from the hands of working-class radicals.

If the Sunday schools provided by Nonconformist churches provoked considerably less official concern, they were nevertheless regarded with deep suspicion by many Anglicans. While the growing strength of Nonconformity had led, according to H. Herbert Jones, author of a report on the employment of children in the mines of north Wales, to many traditional 'barbarous amusements, trespasses and disgusting revels' being discontinued [quoted *BB*, 21], the prevailing Anglican attitude towards Nonconformist education remained one of grave mistrust if not outright hostility. Given the intimate connections between Church, Crown and the political status quo, and the importance attached to education as a means of constructing a subservient working class, such attitudes are hardly surprising, and it is therefore understandable that Anglicans fought long and hard to maintain control over education in Wales. As an Anglican curate from Wrexham commented:

[E]ducation, generally speaking, has not any good tendency unless it is based on religion, and religion taught according to the formularies and catechism of the Church of England . . . I have observed that those who have had some education but were not religiously disposed were the most forward in producing a state of insubordination against employers among the employed; their knowledge seemed only to puff up the mind and to render it less subordinate to superiors. [quoted *BB*, 21]

While such views typified prevailing Anglican attitudes, it remained an uncomfortable fact for the established Church that throughout much of Wales

linguistic and religious differences severely circumscribed the degree of influence which it could exert over social and religious life – a problem which was exacerbated by the refusal of large numbers of Nonconformist parents to send their children to Anglican controlled schools. A child's education was thus often limited to the Nonconformist Sunday school and (potentially) the 'disorganizing doctrines' of political radicals, leading to a considerable fear in official circles that any education a Welsh working-class child did receive would be potentially of an ideologically unsound or even subversive character.

The fundamental barrier obstructing the middle-class aim of creating a subordinate population of loyal British subjects, however, was the existence of the Welsh language itself. Many inspectors, from Tremenheere onwards, commented upon the ineffectual and even ludicrous nature of an Anglophone education system being imposed upon a predominantly Welsh-speaking population. Inspector Mitchell's report in 1848, for instance, of a school 'where two-thirds of the children knew no word of English and the master had not troubled himself by any vain endeavours to learn Welsh', was not untypical of the linguistic situation in many Welsh schools.²⁰ Thus, while education was seen as the means of cultural assimilation, it was simultaneously hindered by the same problems of cultural difference facing all attempts to impose official values upon the Welsh working class. Indeed, the linguistic barrier between Welsh and English was fundamentally a problem of control rather than communication. In England as in Wales, the teaching of an officially prescribed dialect possessed a normalising function that aimed to construct the working class as obedient British subjects through suppressing and degrading distinctive linguistic markers of working-class

difference. Thus, representations of Welsh speech in terms of animal noises – there are references in the 1847 Report, for example, to ‘a Welsh screech’ [II, 25] and ‘a beast’s cry’ [I, 237; quoted *BB*, 185] – are echoed in the terms deployed by officials to describe the speech of working-class children in the north of England – a ‘discordant utterance of articulate sound’ as one Factory Inspector put it.²¹ Such depictions of non-English and non-standard English speech mark both the perceived threat which internal linguistic difference posed to the British normative self and, via an abjection into the realm of the animal, the attempt to negate this threat. The equation of such non-standard dialects and languages with the noises of animals invokes a series of oppositions, not just between human and animal, but between the civilised and the barbarous, the superior and inferior, which official forms of education sought to internalise within the working class themselves. Again, education was seen as essential for the construction and maintenance of a unified British subjectivity, for impenetrable dialects and separate languages created their own discursive domains of experience and values outside the control of British state institutions. This was particularly true of Wales, where, as I have illustrated, the close association of a distinct language with a religious Nonconformism created a cultural domain which undermined (ideologically if not actively) the concept of a unified British self. It is thus significant that the depiction of linguistic difference in the 1847 Report cannot be disentangled from a broader cultural commentary in which *all* aspects of Welsh society and custom are condemned as bestial, primitive and immoral. Within this ‘analysis’, it is the body, and the ways in which it is perceived and made signifiable, that provides the discursive building blocks for the representation of Welsh culture and society.

Language and the Body in the Report

Given the perceived connections between Welsh cultural difference, social and political unrest, and a general lack of British sentiment, it is clear that any inquiry into the state of education in Wales would be primarily an inquiry into the means of culturally assimilating Welsh difference. It is therefore hardly surprising that the three Commissioners given the task of producing the 1847 Report were all upper middle-class English Anglicans and thus in every respect paradigms of what it meant to be 'British'. As Gwyneth Tyson Roberts has shown, the Report which these Commissioners produced naturalises the moral and cultural values of this class, marking the Welsh as correspondingly deficient to the extent in which they deviated from these values [*BB*, *passim*]. Indeed, any cultural deviation from a British norm was considered by the Commissioners as evidence in itself of a barbarous primitivism, conducive of immorality, ignorance and vice. In these terms, the failure of Welsh education was its failure to eradicate these negative qualities and produce loyal British subjects: as Commissioner Ralph Lingen asserted, 'a child might pass through the generality of these schools without learning either the limits, capabilities, general history, or language of that empire of which he is born a citizen' [I, 28; quoted *BB*, 106], while Commissioner Jelinger Symons agreed that '[he had] seldom obtained [from pupils] any account of our great victories or of the inventions which mark the advance of civilisation' [II, 26; quoted *BB*, 106-7]. The use of the pronoun *our* possesses a double charge in such remarks, for it is suggestive of both an assumed association between British values and civilisation, and the Welsh people's lack of British values (and thus of civilisation) by their exclusion from the discursive community which the

Commissioners address. This collusion on a linguistic level with the exclusion of the Welsh from the British self is suggestive – along with the mixture of shock, indignation and smug superiority with which the Commissioners treated the responses to their questionings – of the paradoxical position of these Commissioners in regard to Wales: on the one hand conducting an inquiry within what was officially an intrinsic component of the British state, while on the other faced with the ever present ‘otherness’ of Welsh customs, religious practices and, above all, the Welsh language itself.

As is suggested by Symons’s association of ‘civilisation’ with the advance of British values, this otherness was synonymous with a barbarism which showed off the virtues of English/British civilisation all the more clearly. Indeed, in Symons’s overview the contrast between the two is emphasised through the politically and religiously charged imagery of light and darkness:

Superstition prevails. Belief in charms, supernatural appearances, and even in witchcraft, sturdily survive all the civilisation and light which has long ago banished these remnants of the dark ages elsewhere. Little or none of such light has as yet penetrated the dense darkness which, harboured by their language, and undisturbed by availing efforts of enlightenment, enshrouds the minds of the people. [II, 64; quoted *BB*, 187]

As Roberts points out, darkness here ‘carries both a historical and theological charge’, intertwining in its metaphorical associations not only the ignorance but the

active connivance of the Welsh in wrongdoing. These metaphorical implications are developed by the phrase 'harboured by their language', which places the Welsh language itself as the active agent responsible for the moral and educational failings of its speakers as it 'enshrouds the minds of the people' (suggesting in turn, adds Roberts, the darkness of 'intellectual death') [BB, 187-88].

In holding such attitudes the 1847 Commissioners were far from unique, and followed a long tradition of official discourse concerning Wales. As Ieuan Gwynedd Jones has commented of government officials in general, 'Some of their reports read like voyages of discovery, journeys into unknown regions and communities among people as remote socially from the world of Oxford colleges and well-endowed rural livings as the kraals of darkest Africa.'²² In contrast to Africa, though, Wales could not be abjected as absolute Other, for English policy from the time of the 1536 Act of Union had dictated that Wales was (and always had been) an integral part of the English kingdom: 'the Dominion, Principality and Country of Wales, justly and righteously is, and ever hath been incorporated, annexed, united and subject to and under the imperial crown of this realm as a very member and joint of the same'. This unity with England was predicated upon the simultaneous denial and admittance of Welsh cultural difference, the Act arguing tortuously that while 'some rude and ignorant people have made distinction [between the Welsh and English peoples]' because the Welsh 'do daily use a speech nothing like nor consonant to the natural mother tongue used to within this realm', it was the philanthropic intention of 'His Highness . . . utterly to extirp all the singular sinister uses and customs' upon which such a distinction was based.²³ Symons's location of the darkness of ignorance and superstition within the Welsh

language is thus analogous with the political strategy of 1536, for while marking off the Welsh as different and Other (and ‘sinister’ *because* they are different and Other), it continues to leave open the possibility of ‘enlightenment’ through the abandonment of Welsh and the embracing of all things English. Indeed, in an age in which governments were demanding increasingly that their citizens should regulate their own behaviour,²⁴ it was essential that the Welsh should not only be coerced into loyalty, but also *feel* themselves to be loyal Britons. However hopeless the task might at times appear – ‘What share in those notions which constitute our national existence can a lad have, who calls the capital of England, *Tredeggar* . . . ?’ asked Lingen despairingly [I, 28; quoted *BB*, 86] – it remained a political and ideological necessity that the Welsh be assimilated (at least to the partial extent discussed earlier) within the British self.

This strategy of admitting difference in a way which does not preclude the abolition of such difference is one which operates throughout the Report. In all cases, a binary opposition which identifies English middle-class values as civilised, modern, and embodying the pinnacle of *human* achievement (that is, with what is *natural* and therefore by which all others must be judged), is contrasted with the barbarous, primitive and bestial state of Welsh society and Welsh people.²⁵ This ‘othering’, however, is rarely racialised in a biological sense, but is rather identified with particular aspects of Welsh culture and working-class life that mark the Welsh off as different but do not preclude the possibility of making them (almost) the same (this being, after all, the whole point of the Report). Of course, such a long term aim depended upon a complete cultural shift among the Welsh working class, not only as regards language, but in their whole conception of self,

body and morality: in effect, the Commissioners were asking them to internalise the values and bodily regulations not just of another people but of another class. Indeed, it is the absence of such values (which are co-extensive with the strict delimiting of the individual body) that the Commissioners find most disturbing (but also self-assuring) about Welsh working-class life. For the ‘grotesqueries’ of this life, its moments of bodily transgression, confront the English Commissioners with the barbarity of the Welsh – their utter lack of civilisation – in a way which simultaneously threatens and defines the normative English (civilised) self.

A characteristic way in which the *Report* emphasises this Welsh barbarism is through the use (as already mentioned) of animal imagery and comparisons. Repeatedly, for example, the Commissioners stress the *bestial* nature of Welsh society, its language and its people, thereby illustrating the way in which they instinctively viewed civilisation as predicated upon a regulation and repression of the body, something which the Welsh working class conspicuously failed to achieve. This is particularly true as regards the alleged sexual profligacy of the Welsh. In the eyes of the Commissioners, sex outside of marriage constituted a transgression of the body’s limits (the marriage rite, of course, constituted a symbolic incorporation of the female body by the male) and thus marked both an absence of civilisation and a subversion of ‘human’ (English bourgeois) values. Given this mindset, it was therefore logical to describe the courtship practice of *caru ar y gwely* or ‘bundling’ as ‘bestial indelicacy’ [II, 21], and to ascribe a ‘lack of chastity’ to ‘the revolting habit of herding’ married and unmarried people into the same sleeping quarters on farms [II, 57]. As Commissioner Henry Johnson remarked, while men and women ‘continue to herd like beasts, it is useless to

expect they can be restrained by religion or conscience' [III, 68; quoted *BB*, 184-5].

This equation of the Welsh working class with beasts was strengthened in the Commissioners' minds by the (to them) incomprehensible practice of many poor Welsh farmers of sharing living quarters with their livestock. An anecdotal incident recalled by Symons illustrates nicely how this feature of Welsh rural life was perceived by the Commissioners:

The pigs and poultry form a usual part of the family. In walking down a lane which forms one of the principal entrances to the town [Tregaron], I saw a large sow go up to the door (the lower half of which was shut) and put her forepaws on the top of it and begin shaking it; a woman with a child in her arms rushed across the road from the other side of the way, and immediately opened the door, and the animal walked into the house grunting as if she was offended at the delay; the woman following and closing the door behind her. [II, 58; quoted *BB*, 133]

The overall effect of this story is to merge and even invert the characteristics and relevant importance of woman and animal, culminating in the opening and closing of the door for the sow. While the woman is attributed with bestial qualities by her indecent haste in attending to the animal's wishes (and by the fact that she presumably shares the house with the sow), the pig itself attains an almost human status, standing on two legs to shake the door and 'grunting as if . . . offended'. As

Roberts remarks, even Symons's choice of sentence structure (which makes the sow the grammatical subject of five clauses, the woman of only two) attributes more importance to the animal than to the woman, particularly in the final sentence where the woman's actions quite literally 'follow' the pig's, being outside the main clause of the sentence and described by participles ('following', 'closing') [BB, 133]. Moreover, the final feminine pronoun 'her' could refer to either sow or woman, emphasising again the combination of human and animal characteristics in the passage. Most importantly on a cultural level, however, is the use of the word 'usual' in the first sentence of the passage, which imbues the story that follows with representative significance: in Wales, Symons seems to be saying, the people live like animals and vice versa.

This depiction of the Welsh as bestial in their habits is thus both indicative of their inferiority in the eyes of the Commissioners, and a marker of their bodily transgression, of a moral laxity equated with a failure to regulate and suppress the body and its functions. Indeed, the same conjunction between this 'closed' body, morality and bourgeois civilisation can be ascertained from Johnson's obsessive concern with the extent and standard of sanitary arrangements in schools. As the quotation below reveals, Johnson's lavatorial concerns had very little to do with issues of hygiene; rather, as with other social phenomena commented upon in the Report, the inadequacy of sanitary provision in Welsh schools was seen as symptomatic of the moral turpitude of Welsh civilisation:

It is a fact significant of the Welsh character, that 417 schools (71.5 per cent of the entire number) are destitute of sufficient

outbuildings; 210 (or 36 per cent) having no sort of provision of the kind. The germs of the barbarous and immoral habits which disfigure Welsh civilization are thus implanted in the minds of children, together with the first elements of education. [III, 8; quoted *BB*, 84]

As Roberts comments, the apparent statistical objectivity of the first sentence works to obscure the absence of a causal link for the emotive conclusions expressed in the one that follows – a causality which is further reinforced by the use of the linking word ‘thus’ and the opening phrase’s assertion of the significance of the statistics cited [*BB*, 85]. Though these conclusions may sound somewhat hysterical to the modern reader (who would tend to object to the lack of what Johnson euphemistically terms ‘outbuildings’ on hygienic rather than moral grounds), they express, I would suggest, a deeply bourgeois conception of the relationship between civilisation and the body, the attainment of the former being predicated upon the repression and containment of the latter. Viewed thus, it is no exaggeration for Johnson to claim that a lack of school toilets leads to ‘barbarous and immoral habits which disfigure Welsh civilization’, so linking the moral dangers of inadequate sanitary provision with other moral, social and cultural issues in which the Welsh are deemed guilty of failing to regulate their bodies in accordance with bourgeois notions of propriety. Though it can be argued that Johnson’s concern for the sanitary and sexual habits of the Welsh working class go beyond those of his fellow Commissioners and display a peculiarly personal pathology [*BB*, 84], he seems to regard it as self-evident that his English bourgeois readers would concur that any activity, such as the elimination of bodily waste,

which made boys and girls aware of their physical differences and potentially exposed the body to transgression and temptation, was not only morally detrimental to the individuals concerned but undermined the very foundation of bourgeois civilisation (and by extension the British nation). It is evident from accounts of school visits, however, that such concerns were not always shared by those actually responsible for the day to day running of Welsh schools, and the nonchalant response of one schoolmaster, who when asked if he did not regard the sharing of toilet facilities by boys and girls as 'improper' 'replied that he "never studied the question" ' [III, App. 30-1; quoted *BB*, 143], is indicative of what was at times an unbridgeable gulf between those conceptions of bodily propriety held by the Commissioners and those generally held amongst Wales's working-class population.

It would also not be too fanciful to suggest that the tendency of the Commissioners to equate physical dirtiness with immorality [*BB*, 140-50] was related to similar concerns about bodily transgression. Like bodily excretions, for example, dirt and grime were physical markers of the body's contact with and openness to the world; to the Commissioners, therefore, personal cleanliness was always about far more than simply hygiene: as Roberts comments, 'in the Commissioners' view of the world, dirt functioned as an indicator of moral decline and lack of "civilisation" ' [*BB*, 141]. This is evident in a description of the village of Newborough on Anglesey ('a very dirty and apparently poverty-stricken place') in which immorality is seen as an almost necessary concomitant of filth and poverty, as is emphasised by the use of the same adjective ('degraded') in connection with all three: 'The state of civilisation in Newborough is very low . . .

[its inhabitants'] habits, morals and social conditions are degraded' [III, App. 18; quoted *BB*, 141].

The example of Newborough follows a pattern similar to that found elsewhere in the Report in which particular moral concerns (almost inevitably relating to issues of bodily transgression) provide the nexus to which an associative network of social and cultural commentary can be attached. Thus dirtiness (and therefore immorality) is connected both with the speaking of Welsh (Lingen comments that 'the disregard of cleanliness and decency is more observable in the purely Welsh than in the Anglicised districts' [I, 17; quoted *BB*, 194]) and with membership of Nonconformist denominations. In Symons's description of the town of Tregaron, for example, the juxtaposition of an account of Nonconformist history in the area with a vivid depiction of the filth, poverty and almost animal-like existence of the town's inhabitants, creates the strong impression (without making the connection explicitly causal) that the degradation (social and moral) of the latter is a natural correlate of the pervasive influence of the former:

Welsh Methodism sprung [sic] from this immediate neighbourhood, though its spread has been so extensive of late years that neither this place nor Llangeitho can be said to present any peculiar characteristics or results of Methodist instruction. I think the extreme filthiness of the habits of the poor, though observable everywhere, are as striking in this place, if not more so, than elsewhere, inasmuch as in a town it might be expected that a little more of the outward observances of cleanliness and decency would

be met with. Dung-heaps abound in the lanes and streets. There seemed seldom to be more than one room for living and sleeping in; generally in a state of indescribable disorder and dirty to an excess. The pigs and poultry form a usual part of the family. [II, 147; quoted *BB*, 171-2]

By juxtaposing a sentence stating that Tregaron does not ‘present any peculiar characteristics or results of Methodist instruction’ with one asserting that ‘the extreme filthiness of the habits of the poor . . . are as striking in this place’ as elsewhere, an implicit connection is drawn between the existence of Nonconformity on the one hand and poverty and dirtiness on the other – connections which are subsequently elaborated and extended through implied bestial comparisons in the descriptions of the streets and living conditions, and taken into a moral dimension with the telling conjunction of (the lack of) ‘cleanliness and decency’ [*BB*, 172]. Again, it is evident that a social and cultural critique of the Welsh working class is inseparable from – and, indeed, is reinforced by – a moral critique in which the Welsh are condemned for their failure to conform to the bodily values regulating English bourgeois society: values investing the body and its strict delimiting with a social, moral and cultural significance which it had yet to acquire in working-class life.

One of the most notable features of this condemnation of bodily transgression was its strong gender bias, women being judged particularly harshly by the Report’s Commissioners for their perceived transgressions; in accounts of the Welsh courtship practice of *caru ar y gwely*, for instance, it is a lack of female

chastity which most offends the Commissioners, the role that men might play in making such a lack of chastity possible receiving relatively little comment [BB, 165-6]. In taking this harder line on women the Commissioners were simply reflecting conventional thinking of the day, which tended to view women as less capable of rational thought than men and therefore as closer to the world of animals (as was emphasised by their ability to give birth, a capability which directly linked them to the reproductive function and the organic cycles of death and decay to which all life was subject). It followed that, as (relatively) irrational creatures, women were far more susceptible to bodily temptations than men, and, in consequence, their behaviour had to be regulated the more rigorously. On top of this, women were also responsible for the upbringing of the next generation and thus had to be seen as morally beyond reproach: as Symons reminded his readers, 'each generation will derive its moral tone in a great degree from the influences implanted by the mothers who reared them' [II, 57; quoted BB, 165].

A striking example of the Commissioners' more rigorous expectations concerning female bodily propriety occurred in a visit by Lingen to children under quarantine in a Union Workhouse School in Llanelli. While apparently able to withstand the filth and squalor of the boys' ward long enough to ask (and receive answers to) an extensive array of questions on various subjects, Lingen records that he found the room in which the girls were housed to be 'so close and offensive *that I could not enter*' [I, 212-13; original emphasis; quoted BB, 162]. In respect of Lingen's very different responses to male and female bodily odour, it might be worth noting again Kristeva's point that it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order' [PH, 4]. Clearly, Lingen

possessed a series of socially-conditioned expectations about how female bodies should smell which differed from those relating to (working-class) males, and the disruption of these expectations naturally provoked in him expressions of revulsion and disgust: somatic symptoms which asserted (and sought to safeguard) his English upper middle-class identity from the impinging presence of feminine body odour.

Indeed, such feelings are not merely evidence of bourgeois squeamishness; as other passages in the *Report* indicate, bourgeois notions about female bodily propriety could easily acquire social and cultural significance, the Commissioners often positing a direct correlation between the flouting of bodily taboos and other socially transgressive phenomena:

Mr Richards [a local vicar] tells me that although he spent some years as curate of Merthyr Tydfil, in the county of Glamorgan, which is usually considered the most depraved and uncivilised locality in Wales, yet he never met with so much poverty, so much social and moral degradation, as at Rhosllanerchrugog. He complained that throughout the district the women have no kind of knowledge of the duties of their sex, or of common household occupations and requirements; that till lately needlework was unknown among them. [III, App. 76; quoted *BB*, 159]

The structure of the two sentences in this passage seems not only to imply that depravity, barbarism, and 'social and moral degradation' are a direct result of

women failing to fulfil their domestic obligations (the natural ‘duties of their sex’), but that this failure is an integral part of the ‘social and moral degradation’ so lamented by the local informant, who cites an ignorance of needlework as ultimate proof of the area’s barbarity. That a failure by women to remain safely tucked away within the domestic sphere could lead to other, more pernicious forms of transgression was made even more explicit by Richards elsewhere in his evidence to the Commission, the Anglican vicar complaining hysterically that the work of clearing coal from pit entrances in which many local women were employed was ‘immoral’, ‘degrading and unnatural for women’, and a cause of women becoming ‘bold and impudent and unnaturally vicious’. These connections were cemented (at least in the mind of Richards) by the recent birth of an illegitimate child whose mother, a sixteen-year-old girl, was employed at the local pits [III, App. 76; quoted *BB*, 161-2]. A failure by women to find appropriate employment (or, better still, to remain at home and perfect their domestic duties) was thus directly equated with an inability to conform to bourgeois notions of sexual (and thus bodily) propriety. Again, then, evidence of the Welsh working-class’s failure to control and regulate its bodily functions was inseparable from a broader indictment of Welsh society and culture – an indictment which, as we shall see, was to have long and lasting ramifications for the subsequent development of Welsh identity.

The Aftermath

The peculiarly bourgeois conception of the body as closed and self-contained, sealed off from contact with other bodies and the external world, was, as I have

argued above, central to the Commissioners' condemnation of the Welsh in the 1847 Report. In transgressing this body, the Welsh were not only morally lax, but lacking in self-control, civilisation, and even humanity. Ironically, the Welsh Nonconformist nation which emerged during the second half of the century, while furiously denouncing the Blue Books Report as the product of English and Anglican prejudice and ignorance, accepted almost without question the values and belief system which had enabled the Report's Commissioners to arrive at the conclusions that they did. As Prys Morgan puts it, 'Victorian radical Wales, which might be said to have been born out of this furore, regarded the whole business as a foul libel and an act of treachery. But it quietly accepted many of the strictures, aims and intentions of the reports.'²⁶ In consequence, it was the rigid patriarchal values of nineteenth-century bourgeois England, with, in Jane Aaron's words, all their '[f]ear and loathing of uncontained female sexuality', which were to be henceforth posited as essentially and representatively Welsh: 'the essence of nineteenth-century Welsh Nonconformity'.²⁷ Indeed, the growing consolidation of Welsh identity around Nonconformity (an identification which the Report partly enabled), gave Nonconformist attempts to regulate the body a nationalist dimension that mirrored in many respects the Commissioners' attempts to construct an homogeneous British nation. The Commissioners' perception of bodily transgression, for instance, as indicative of a potential threat to British bourgeois identity, was increasingly paralleled after 1847 by a Nonconformist tendency to regard transgressive behaviour no longer as simply irreligious or immoral, but as a direct subversion of the moral foundations of Welsh nationhood; haunted by accusations of immorality and sexual profligacy, it was Nonconformity itself that began to perform the Commissioners' task of regulating the Welsh body

and strengthening normative bourgeois codes of behaviour amongst Wales's working class.

Of course, it can be argued that Nonconformist regulation of the body was nothing new; as H. Herbert Jones, author of an 1842 government report, acknowledged, it was the growing strength of Nonconformity which had led to the discontinuance of many traditional 'barbarous amusements, trespasses and disgusting revels' in north Wales [quoted *BB*, 21]. Indeed, Welsh Nonconformity, particularly its Calvinistic strain, had for decades placed considerable emphasis on many values – temperance, female chastity, and the desirability of cleanliness and order – which English bourgeois culture held in common. At the same time, however, Nonconformity had been forced to accommodate the existence of a vigorous working-class culture whose distinctive customs and practices it could not always officially sanction, and, in consequence, a blind eye was often turned towards transgressive behaviour: as the testimony to the Report of the vicar of Begeli in Pembrokeshire indicates, the practice of fertility-testing, in which a woman had to first demonstrate her fertility before her lover would marry her, was widespread among his predominantly Nonconformist population, the bride being already pregnant in sixty-four out of seventy recent marriages at which he had presided (only weddings performed by Anglican clergy were legally valid) [I, 421-2; quoted *BB*, 164]. After 1847, however, such tolerance on the part of Nonconformist chapels became increasingly rare, the evidence suggesting both an intensification of Nonconformity's policing of the body and a new emphasis (reflecting the Commissioners' concerns) on the control of female sexuality and behaviour. With regard to this latter point, it is noticeable that while

Nonconformist disapproval of *caru ar y gwely* dated from long before 1847,²⁸ the systematic imposition of social and religious sanctions against the parties involved (particularly the female parties) did not begin to occur until later in the century, following the publication of the Report.²⁹

Indeed, during the latter half of the century Nonconformist control over the body (and particularly the female body) was strengthened by both overt threat – public excommunication from the chapel and social ostracisation – and through more indirect and insidious means of cultural pressure. The first Welsh-language periodicals designed specifically for a female readership, for example, appeared within a few years of the Commissioners' Report, and these attempted to instil the same values of bodily propriety amongst Welsh women as those accepted and followed by English 'ladies'. It was perhaps no coincidence that the first of these periodicals, *Y Gymraes* ('The Welshwoman') was edited from 1850 to 1851 by one of the fiercest and most eloquent critics of the 1847 Report, Evan Jones ('Ieuan Gwynedd'). As Aaron argues with regard to this and later periodicals, '[t]he need to confound the "lying tales" of the *Report* continued to function as a moral imperative throughout the century'.³⁰ This was true not only of courtship practices and general feminine decorum, but of other social phenomena which had caught the disapproving eyes of the Commissioners. The temperance movement, for instance, which had first begun to spread through Wales during the 1830s [BB, 146], increased considerably during the latter half of the century, culminating in the Sunday Closing Act of 1881, the first ever Act of Parliament to apply exclusively to Wales. In relation to the issues of bodily propriety discussed above, it is worth noting that, in the eyes of both the 1847 Commissioners and later

Nonconformists, drink was regarded as an evil not so much because of its injurious effects to health, but because of the acts of social and sexual impropriety with which its consumption was intimately associated [BB, 146-7].

This intensification of Nonconformist disapproval of what it regarded as immoral behaviour possessed profound cultural and political consequences for the future development of Welsh identity. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, even minor and apparently insignificant attempts to reform manners and codes of social behaviour act to 'embody' (and thus render 'natural') new forms of identity so as to displace the old:

If all societies . . . that seek to produce a new man through a process of 'deculturation' and 'reculturation' set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing*, physical and verbal *manners*, the reason is that, treating the body as a memory, they entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e. mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation. . . . The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant . . . the concessions of *politeness* always contain *political* concessions.³¹

Such concessions are particularly apparent in Welsh Nonconformity's ambiguous relationship to both its own working class and the English bourgeoisie. While on the one hand, for instance, asserting vigorously the political and cultural achievements of Welsh Nonconformity and the Welsh people (two terms which became increasingly synonymous), many among Wales's Nonconformist elite simultaneously regarded English culture as the epitome of civilised values and thus as the benchmark by which Welsh civilisation and achievements should be judged and evaluated. This equivocal attitude is exemplified politically by the rapid development of British imperial sentiments (the Welsh, says Gwyn A. Williams, 'were not merely reconciled to Empire, they were enthusiastic junior partners in it'),³² and culturally by the deep-seated attraction felt by many Nonconformist ministers towards the English language and its culture. As Ieuan Gwynedd Jones notes, English culture was increasingly admired by ministers during the nineteenth century, and young men training for the ministry put 'enormous efforts' into acquiring the language. To these men, Jones argues, 'English became an additional code, an indicator of social class, which is why they enjoyed using English when writing privately to each other and why they multiplied the social and public occasions on which its use might seem to be prescribed'. Indeed, the linguistic hierarchy propagated by many English observers, which separated a materialist, progressive English from a spiritual, mystical Welsh fit only for poetry and religion, was confirmed and propagated by many of the self-proclaimed defenders of Welsh nationality. It is worth noting, for example, that English was the dominant or exclusive language of virtually all schools, colleges and academies in Wales (including the University), many of which were under Nonconformist control or influence.³³

However, while themselves embracing English culture, the Nonconformist elite continued to assert their social and political role as the rightful representatives of the Welsh nation and people. To this end, English, the language of social advancement and material progress, was condemned as the language of atheism, secularism and (in a reversal of the Commissioners' verdict) drunkenness and immorality:

[The English] . . . reveal more infidelity and beastliness in a week than many a part of Wales ever experienced; drunkenness, lewdness and all other curses of the English will flood our dear country unless we are prepared to withstand the attack and turn back the flood by raising the banner in the name of our God.³⁴

The Welsh language was thus regarded by Nonconformists (and even by the same Nonconformist individuals) in opposing and paradoxical terms: as a defence against the corrupting moral influences of English materialism, but also as a barrier to social advancement within the secular world. The ideology of Progress, so intrinsic to nineteenth-century English culture, was a defining aspect of English alterity to Welsh Nonconformity: officially repudiated while secretly desired. Like the abject, expelled yet always present, these conflictual elements of Welsh identity inevitably returned to shape and influence the Nonconformist institutions from which they were officially absent, undermining Nonconformity's moral authority in the process. This was reflected not only in terms of linguistic orientation, but in the growing grandeur of later nineteenth-century chapels, and

even in the dress, mannerisms and social mores of ministers. It was said, comments Jones, that these latter 'tended to *ape* the manners of English ministers in style of dress and mode of living' [my emphasis].³⁵

This 'aping' of English bourgeois values was also reflected in the relationship of Nonconformity (and its political wing in the Welsh Liberal party) to Wales's growing industrial working class. Significantly, the very existence of such a class was effectively denied by those who saw Welshness as the embodiment of the *gwerin*: the classless, cultivated, Nonconformist rural 'folk' who formed the bedrock of the new Welsh nation. While the concept of the *gwerin* undoubtedly reflected a certain lived reality, it also came to serve, as Williams points out, 'as a mobilizing myth for a middle class which had climbed out of it'.³⁶ Such a 'myth' was also a mystification, for in its organicist vision of a rural Welsh-speaking Wales, the concept of a *gwerin* not only served to elide the extent of class divisions and antagonisms in Welsh society, but helped to extend the domain of bourgeois Nonconformist morality into working-class life. The political impact of all this cannot be underestimated, as large numbers of the Welsh working class were subsumed by the ideological perspectives of a Nonconformist nationalism which obscured their class interests. By the second half of the century, Jones asserts, 'the only politics they [the Welsh working class] knew were those which could be discussed in the language of morals and middle-class values . . . [they] had been socialized in accordance with the norms of the middle classes'.³⁷ Certainly, it is significant that, in the general election of 1868, Henry Richard, in his famous pre-election address to the people of Merthyr Tydfil, felt no need to mention relations between industrial capitalists and their workers in what was, at the time, Wales's

most industrialised constituency. As David L. Adamson comments, there was no need to: the issue of land, and the mobilising capacity of the discourse of tenant politics – in short, the traditional staples of *gwerin* politics – provided Richard's appeal with all the national quality that it required.³⁸ At this stage at least, the specific needs of an industrial Wales outside of cosy notions of the *gwerin* could still safely be ignored; the Liberal-Nonconformist grip on Welsh loyalties (inside as well as outside the coalfield) was yet to face any substantive challenge.

Much more could obviously be said on this subject, but to do so would be to stray further from the main contention of this chapter: that the adoption by Welsh Nonconformity of an English bourgeois conception of the body (partly in response to the criticisms contained within the 1847 Report) possessed deep and lasting ramifications for the ways in which Welsh identity was subsequently perceived and constructed, ramifications which would shape the development of Welsh identity well into the twentieth century and have very real effects upon the bodies and minds of ordinary working-class people. Indeed, ultimately the 1847 Report was successful in its avowed aim of extending bourgeois bodily values and regulations to the Welsh working class. The national revival which it stimulated, for instance, far from being opposed to these processes of assimilation, actively sought to construct Welsh culture in conformance with bourgeois notions of morality and bodily propriety. It is no surprise, then, given the corporeal foundations of subjectivity, that the concept of Welsh nationhood which emerged after 1847 found itself predicated upon, and contained within, the same bourgeois ideals which it purported to reject. The nascent Welsh nationalist movement, it could be argued, was doomed to operate within a bourgeois identity politics that

regarded Welsh culture – or at the very least Welsh working-class culture – as irredeemably subaltern and subject.

¹ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales . . . In Three Parts. Part I, Carmarthen, Glamorgan and Pembroke. Part II, Brecknock, Cardigan, Radnor and Monmouth. Part III, North Wales* (London, 1847). The three Commissioners responsible for each respective part were Ralph Robert Wheeler Lingen, Jelinger Cookson Symons, and Henry Vaughan Johnson. Subsequent references are hereafter cited in the main text by part and page number.

² Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868-1922* [1963] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 16, 17.

³ Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales: The Observers and the Observed* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 165.

⁴ See Prys Morgan, 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', in R. R. Davies et. al. (eds.), *Welsh Society and Nationhood: Historical Essays Presented to Glanmor Williams* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1984), pp. 199-215. Morgan describes how an older folkloric and mythological tradition of the Welsh past came to be superseded during the 1850s and '60s by the more contemporary concerns of Nonconformity and its own attendant 'mythology' (p. 214).

⁵ Gwynfor Evans, *Land of my Fathers* [1974] (Swansea: Y Lolfa, 1992), p. 374; also pp. 366-74 in general.

⁶ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* [1985] (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 208-09, 210.

⁷ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 322, 6.

⁸ For events in Merthyr, see Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978). Two full-length studies of the Newport Rising are Ivor Wilks, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839: Class Struggle as Armed Struggle* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), and David J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Chartist Insurrection of 1839* [1985] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999). The Rebecca Riots are described in David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955), and Pat Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1983). Scotch Cattle activities are analysed in David Jones, *Before Rebecca: Popular Protest in Wales 1793-1835* (London: Allen Lane, 1975).

⁹ Quoted in Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, p. 123.

¹⁰ Quoted in Wilks, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839*, p. 26.

¹¹ Quoted in Elinor N. Williams, 'H.M. Inspectorate in Wales', in W. Gareth Evans (ed.), *Perspectives on a Century of Secondary Education in Wales 1889-1989* (Aberystwyth: Centre for Education Studies, 1990), p. 130.

¹² Quoted in Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, p. 126.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Quoted also in Gillian Sutherland, *Elementary Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Historical Association, 1971), p. 10.

¹⁵ Bhabha's concept of 'colonial mimicry' – 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite' [LC, 86; original emphasis] – is clearly relevant here, a fact supporting the contention that the embourgeoisement of the working class in Britain was itself a form of internal colonialism – and, moreover, that the consolidation of the bourgeois nation was a prerequisite of colonialism.

¹⁶ See also Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, pp. 115-17.

¹⁷ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Wilks, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839*, pp. 92-120.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁰ Quoted in Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, p. 120.

²¹ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 119.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²³ Quoted in Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 492-3.

²⁴ For an analysis of this Europe-wide phenomenon, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), *passim*.

²⁵ Jonathan Dollimore points out a fundamental contradiction within the commonplace ideological conception of nature/culture enshrined in such oppositions: 'Culture is construed both as the (binary) opposite of nature, yet also "rooted" in nature in the sense that it operates according to, or reflects, natural law; it is at once the antithesis of nature and its natural consequence' (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 115). Such a paradox suggests how Welsh society can be depicted on the one hand as the binary opposite of civilisation and culture (that is, located within the world of *nature* as primitive, barbarous, wild) while also being construed as 'unnatural' precisely *for* being outside the realm of civilisation and culture.

²⁶ Morgan, 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', in *Welsh Society and Nationhood*, p. 210.

²⁷ Aaron, 'Finding a voice in two tongues', in *Our Sisters' Land*, p. 183.

²⁸ See, for instance, Catrin Stevens, *Welsh Courting Customs* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1993), pp. 103-4, who cites condemnatory articles in denominational periodicals (*Seren Gomer* and *Yr Eurgrawn Wesleyaidd*) from 1818 and 1819 respectively.

²⁹ Aaron, 'Finding a voice in two tongues', in *Our Sisters' Land*, p. 187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-8.

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 94-5. Quoted in Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 88.

³² Williams, *When Was Wales?*, p. 202.

³³ Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, p. 67.

³⁴ *Y Diwygiwr* (1851), p. 64; quoted *ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁶ Williams, *When Was Wales?*, p. 208.

³⁷ Jones, *Mid-Victorian Wales*, pp. 75, 76.

³⁸ David L. Adamson, *Class, Ideology and the Nation: A Theory of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 106. From a strongly Marxist perspective, Adamson argues that the conflation of Nonconformity with Welsh identity was due primarily to class conflict between anglicised, Anglican landlords and their Welsh-speaking, Nonconformist tenantry. This interstice of class, religion and nationality fuelled the growth of Nonconformity as a political force, Nonconformist chapels offering 'the means and the strength to oppose the landlords' (pp. 105-6).

3

Rejecting the *Gwerin*: Biblical Abjection in Caradoc**Evans's *My People***

By the first decade of the twentieth century, it is possible to detect a growing disenchantment in industrial south Wales with *gwerin* politics, one which was increasingly expressed as a greater will on the part of incipient Labour movements to challenge the cultural and political hegemony of Nonconformity. As a consequence, the national solidarities formed after 1847 had never looked less certain, ruptured by both the development of a native industrial class in south Wales (whose leaders dominated local branches of the Liberal party) and the influx of large numbers of English-speaking migrants, many of whom were familiar with the language of socialism and felt no sentimental attachment to the aims and aspirations of what had become a Nonconformist middle class.¹ To the increasingly Anglophone, culturally diverse, and often militantly socialist south Walian population, the twin concerns of temperance and disestablishment which dominated the political agenda of this class seemed an irrelevance, a distraction from the real needs of an exploited industrial society. Growing in political self-confidence, this new society began to change not only the face of Welsh politics but, against continuing Nonconformist resistance, also constructed an alternative, oppositional, and radically new mode of Welshness, that of the Welsh working class. Indeed, as Gwyn A. Williams argues, the years preceding World War I marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of Welsh identity, constituting a transitional period in which forms of identification centred around the notion of a

gwerin were replaced (in south Wales at least) by new working-class loyalties and affiliations:

It was in the last decade before the War, when anything resembling a *gwerin* was fast disappearing from Welsh earth, that the *gwerin*'s self-appointed voices filled the Welsh air. This was precisely the point at which a *working class* started to break in, because, however styles might resemble each other, realities were totally different – different in context, in manner of thinking and speaking and organizing, different in language and culture. In content the worlds of the *gwerin* and the *working class* were as remote as was the Aberystwyth Restaurant in Tonypandy where they drafted the *Miner's Next Step* from the town which gave it its name. In order to assert its own Welshness, the *working class* had to break the hegemony of the *gwerin* and prise loose its mental grip.²

In terms of cultural background, Caradoc Evans seems at first an unlikely figure in this process of mental emancipation. Brought up in the southern Cardiganshire village of Rhydlewys, Evans was very much *of the gwerin*, the product of a rural society which was still overwhelmingly monoglot Welsh in speech and Nonconformist in religion. It was precisely Evans's position as dissident, however, his 'insider' knowledge of Nonconformity and its culture, which made his satirical critique of the *gwerin* and its traditions – particularly within his first collection of short stories, *My People* – all the more powerful and, in consequence, the more resented. Within the fictional setting of Manteg ('A Fair

Place' in English), Evans created the ultimate antidote for the rural myth of the cultured *gwerin*, constructing an 'anti-myth' of a bestial, carnally-minded peasantry ruled over by a grasping, hypocritical Nonconformist priesthood. By lambasting the *gwerin* in this way, Evans provoked outrage from Welsh Nonconformists who regarded him as a mouthpiece for English prejudice and racial superiority and saw *My People* as a repetition by one of their own of the lies and calumnies of 1847. Certainly, the renewed interest in the Welsh as 'primitive Celt' which *My People* provoked suggests that these Nonconformist commentators may have had a point, Evans's unflattering depiction of rural west Wales life appealing strongly to an English imagination whose opinions of the Welsh had changed little since the time of the Commissioners' Report. As Mary Jones remarks, Evans's satirical points were often missed completely by English reviewers, many of whom regarded the exotic strangeness of Evans's caricatures as further confirmation that the Welsh were indeed little better than primitive savages: one reviewer saw little difference 'between the candidly savage hlobonga of the Zulu and the bed courtship of West Wales', while another found *My People* valuable for the remarkable insight it provided 'on the psychology of the Obi Man'. To such critics, *My People* was not only a laudable exercise in social realism, but a work of more general sociological and anthropological significance. Indeed, regarded as something of an anthropological pioneer, Evans was praised for opening up a world of 'primeval beings who still live within a six hour railway journey of London', and casting light on a country of 'ferocious primitives' whose 'sacrifices are made to that which is older than Paganism and as old as human sin'.³

However, despite Nonconformist cries of treachery and a strong political backlash during which copies of *My People* were seized by police,⁴ Evans's work was to find considerable favour amongst a subsequent generation of Anglo-Welsh writers, most of whom lived or had grown up in urban/industrial milieus very different from that of rural Cardiganshire. To many of these writers, resentful of what they regarded as the chapel's baleful influence on Welsh culture and society, Evans possessed the status of a cultural and literary hero: an artist who was not only brave enough to point out that the emperor had no clothes, but whose manipulation of the English language and outright rejection of the *gwerin* had cleared the ideological space in which an Anglophone and yet distinctively Welsh literary tradition could establish itself.⁵ Indeed, to this succeeding generation of Anglophone Welshmen (and they nearly were all men), Evans, in a manner akin to his Irish contemporary James Joyce,⁶ was transformed from cultural apostate to cultural hero, regarded widely as the spiritual 'father' of modern Anglo-Welsh writing ('the daddy of us all', as Gwyn Jones once commented).⁷ Certainly, his combative example helped to shape the development of Anglo-Welsh writing as a dissenting voice within Welsh cultural politics, a rebellion against received notions of 'Welshness'. As Gwyn Jones remarked, after *My People* 'the war horn was blown, the gauntlet thrown down, the gates of the temple were shattered . . .'⁸

However, it is not Evans's influence on the subsequent development of Anglo-Welsh literature that I wish to trace in this chapter, but his complex positioning within the Nonconformist culture that he sought to reject – a positioning emphasised, I would argue, by the generic medium of the grotesque in which his hostility towards the social and moral imperatives of Nonconformity is

so strikingly conveyed. As my discussion in Chapters 1 and 2 above implies, far from echoing, as Tony Conran argues, a simple 'rejection' of Nonconformist culture,⁹ this use of the grotesque is symptomatic of Nonconformity's *abjection*, and thus of Evans's implication in the same discursive/ideological structures he is attempting to reject. Like Pedr in 'A Just Man in Sodom', it is arguable that Evans can only respond to the social oppression he sees around him in the peculiar religious mode of his community, striking, in both *My People* and the letters in which he defends this text, a prophetic pose deeply indebted to biblical (and specifically Nonconformist) modes of discourse. I would emphasise, though, that in contrast to Kristeva's defensive account of abjection, Evans's abjection of Nonconformity seeks not to establish symbolic law but to disrupt it in a manner more akin to Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In the rich tapestry of biblical allusion, quotation, and parodic reinscription constructed in *My People*, Evans 'mimics', appropriates, and implodes Nonconformity's discursive authority, reinscribing as abject its claims to speak on behalf of a divine purity. Within this process, the grotesque plays a key role as a symbolic marker of the sense of revulsion and disgust underpinning Evans's rejection of Nonconformity. However, as I will argue, this invocation of disgust is inherently problematic, being predicated upon an adherence to the same symbolic law that is rejected. In depicting Welsh Nonconformity as bestial, corrupt and inhuman, Evans implicates himself in the same patriarchal oppression that he is seeking to overthrow, reinforcing the categories of disgust and disavowal foundational of the Nonconformist identity he so abhors.

A Biblical Society

As has been argued, social and cultural identities in bourgeois societies are predicated upon an imaginary representation of the body as a discrete contained entity. The abjection of bodily waste is thus paralleled in the cultural representation (and physical oppression) of those who transgress normative identities and thereby reveal the fragility of the symbolic (social) order. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the grotesquerie of Evans's language in *My People* finds its counterpart in the excrementitious language with which he and his work were dismissed by the defenders of Nonconformity. In various reviews and letters to *The Western Mail*, Evans was accused (to cite a sample) of 'magnifying a cesspool', of producing 'a farrago of blasphemy and obscenity', and of inhabiting a 'moral sewer'. After the publication of Evans's second collection of short stories, *Capel Sion* (1916), an anonymous reviewer in *The Western Mail* went so far as to announce that his 'final feeling on finishing the work [was] to go and have a bath'.¹⁰ Most bizarrely of all, one Nonconformist objector accused Evans of possessing an imagination 'like a sexual pig-sty'.¹¹ It should be noted that the story 'A Just Man in Sodom' anticipates this reaction, the 'just man' of the title, Pedr, a harmless simpleton and would-be social critic who preaches against the iniquities of Capel Sion, finding himself on the receiving end of a barrage of abuse, violence and (very real) excrement [*MP*, 102-7]. While spared Pedr's indignities, Evans was also to find that to criticise Nonconformist institutions was to make oneself an object of revulsion and repudiation. By invoking a language of horror and disgust, Nonconformity attempted to dismiss *My People* as 'anti-Welsh', thus propelling it

to the far side of the border separating self from Other and denying the validity of its artistic vision.

Such an abjection, however, is inevitably a problematical process, implicating the subject in the very thing – faeces, bodily fluids or deviant group – which it rejects. To reiterate Elizabeth Gross's remark, '[this waste] can never be definitively and permanently externalized: it *is* the subject; it *cannot* be completely expelled'.¹² The attempted abjection of *My People* only serves to emphasise, therefore, the extent to which it is indebted to the Welsh Nonconformist culture it rejects and is rejected by. This point can be exemplified by the description of Pedr standing 'open-mouthed' and ready to preach on Sadrach Danyrefail's cart, his lips smeared with 'a handful of horse-dung' which Sadrach the Small has thrown at him [*MP*, 102-3]. The strongly carnivalesque nature of this episode, with its inversion, through the transformation of Pedr's speaking lips into an anus, of 'high' and 'low' bodily characteristics, emphasises the blasphemous nature (in the eyes of Nonconformity) of Pedr's words: their corruption by the body's abject matter. Simultaneously, however, these words also condemn the chapel hierarchy, not just in their literal sense, but also in the ways in which they echo official Nonconformist discourse. In a sense, Nonconformity is tainted by the same excrement through which Pedr speaks:

Thus said the Big Man: 'Capel Sion has become as a temple of pig buyers; a woman without glory. Pedr bach, do you say to them that I will destroy their crops and rot their bones, that not one male, nor female, nor child shall rise from the grave when my little servant

Gabriel blows on his old trumpet. They will abide among the filthy,
creeping things of the earth.' [MP, 104-5]

It is not so much Pedr's overt condemnation of Capel Sion that makes him 'reviled' amongst its congregation, but his assumption of 'the mantle of a prophet' [MP, 105], his appropriation of the authoritative proclamations of a Nonconformist preacher. Through his mouth/anus, Pedr – like Isaiah, 'a man of unclean lips' [Isaiah 6:5] – constructs a discourse that does not simply parody that of Nonconformity, but identifies with the discursive structures that it simultaneously defiles.

Indeed, when discussing *My People*, it is important to note Evans's own identification with, and positioning within, a Nonconformist literary tradition dating back to the late eighteenth century – a culture which, as Derec Llwyd Morgan argues, had transformed the revelatory experiences recorded in the Bible, and the language in which those experiences were related, into part of its own literary and cultural inheritance, what he terms 'a tribal idiom':

By means of this sensitive discipline [of theology and Scripture] the Methodist poets got to the point of identifying the archetypes, the geography, the stories and the portraits of both Testaments with their own experiences, thus ensuring that they would influence the imagination of their readers in a way that would make their extensive inner experiences resemble the historical and revelatory experiences recorded in the Bible itself. . . . What is notably special

about the poetry of the Methodists is that there is so much of it, that its influence has been so far-reaching, so that its language has become a tribal idiom, and that this body of poetry has in turn given to its readers a commonly shared imagination. . . . The place-names *Egypt, Canaan, Sinai, Zion*, with their contrasting shades of significance, are repeated over and over, just as the metaphors *balm of Gilead, rose of Sharon*, and others, occur time after time. . . . So often are they used that these individual names, the word clusters, and the various references, develop into living symbols of the mind of the converted.¹³

It is significant that *My People* is itself part of this ‘tribal idiom’, Evans not only deploying layers of biblical allusion in his stories, but adopting an Old Testament diction as the basis of his narrative style. In contrast to the Methodist poets of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Evans’s use of biblical imagery and language possesses a two-fold function, his biblical cadences both mocking those who would misuse religious language for social and political purposes, while also, in John Harris’s words, ‘lend[ing] . . . [his] narrative an air of authoritative proclamation: simple, often majestic, and suggestive also of parable and myth’ [*MP*, 10]. Thus, ironically, Evans draws upon the same biblical authority as his Nonconformist opponents, turning their Christian precepts back against themselves. The penultimate paragraph of ‘Lamentations’, a story of incest between father and daughter and the latter’s subsequent madness, provides a good example of Evans’s ‘biblical’ prose. This paragraph makes both specific allusion to a biblical passage – Genesis 6:2, where ‘the sons of God saw the daughters of men

that they were fair' – and adopts a biblical tone throughout by its archaisms and exploitation of paratactical syntax, the equal weighting of clauses within a sentence. It is worth noting as well that the incident which provides the catalyst for Matilda's madness – the discovery of her drunken father wearing the skin of a horse his drinking companions in Mistress Shames's tavern have draped over him – is itself indicative of the extent to which Nonconformist modes of discourse have penetrated every aspect of social life in Manteg, including the public house. Indeed, far from providing an enlightened political opposition, free from the tyrannical strictures of the chapel deacons, the 'loose, wild men' of Mistress Shames's tavern [MP, 140] often reproduce, in carnivalised form, the chapel culture they ostensibly repudiate. The draping of the horse's skin over Evan Rhiw, for instance, while reflecting earlier folk rituals such as the *ceffyl pren*, also parallels the 'shaming' rituals of Nonconformity – as is implied by the comments of the 'light men': 'What shall we do . . . to humble him before the congregation?' [MP, 144]. I quote from where Matilda discovers her humiliated father:

His daughter Matilda saw him and was disturbed, and she kept out of his way until he slept. Then she issued forth from her hiding place, and said to herself: 'Jesus bach, if the sons of men wear the habit of horses the daughters of God must go naked.' She cast from her body her clothes, and went down the Roman road and into the village. The people closed their doors on her, and for four days she wandered thereabouts nakedly. The men of the neighbourhood laid rabbit traps on the floor of the fields, and one trap caught the foot of Matilda, and she was delivered into Evan's

hands. Having clothed her, he took a long rope, the length and thickness that is used to keep a load of hay intact, and one end of the rope he fastened round her right wrist and one end round the left wrist. In this wise he drove her before him, in the manner in which a colt is driven, to the madhouse of the three shires, which is in the town of Carmarthen, and the distance from Manteg to Carmarthen is twenty-four miles. [MP, 144]

The centrality of animalism is immediately noticeable in this passage: Matilda is both hunted like a rabbit and driven as a colt. Indeed, throughout *My People* women are continually depicted and treated as animals, whether it is as commodity (in 'A Heifer Without Blemish' finding a wife is treated in the same manner as buying cattle [MP, 59]) or dirty temptress: the servant girl Lissi in 'The Redeemer' is a 'brazen slut' and a 'sow' [MP, 113]; 'poor Roberts bach' in 'The Talent Thou Gavest' is forgiven his transgression with his servant Mari after he sends 'the bad bitch about her business' [MP, 77]; while Matilda is herself described by the minister of Capel Sion, Bern-Davydd, as 'an adder in [Evan Rhiw's] house' [MP, 143]. As Kristeva argues, the discourse of animalism is itself a form of abjection, a realm where qualities unassimilable by normative discourses – such as certain types of sexual and violent behaviour – are projected and thus disavowed [PH, 12-13]. The depiction of women as animals in *My People* is thus indicative of the abjection of sexual sin outside the masculine self onto women (and especially lower-class women), who are then blamed for male transgression. To cite a rare light-hearted example from the supernatural folk-tale 'The Devil in Eden', Old Ianto of the Road blames his own daughter for tempting the devil [MP,

91]! Moreover, it is precisely this depiction of women as animals which justifies the violence of their oppression: in 'A Bundle of Life', for example, Abram Bowen feels compelled to tell Nansi that she 'stink[s] like an old sow' [MP, 132] before he can evict her from her farm. Significantly, the catalyst for Matilda's madness is the sight of her father in the skin of a horse, an appropriate symbol of his own abjected animalism: 'Jesus bach, if the sons of men wear the habit of horses the daughters of God must go naked.' The horse skin conveys to Matilda the reality of her father's 'animal' carnality, his unthinkable and unspeakable abject condition, and it is this knowledge which drives her insane, transforming her into the animal that, in Manteg's patriarchal discourse, she is already. The details of this transformation, though, are imbued with an aura of horrific grandeur and significance by the biblical diction, the detached and indiscriminating way in which observations of differing importance are made: the description of the rope, for example, and the distance between Manteg and Carmarthen, which are given equal weight to Matilda's condition. The dignity of this diction provides an added barb to Evans's satire, foregrounding the contrast between the measured and dignified biblical discourse (and the Christian moral code which it evokes) and the horrifying cruelty of Matilda's treatment.

If in 'Lamentations' an ironic contrast is drawn between the professed Christianity of the people of Manteg and the reality of their behaviour, there is, however, also a sense in which it is the biblical code itself that is implicitly condemned. By illustrating the manipulation of biblical diction to provide social oppression with divine sanction, the object of Evans's satire becomes blurred, for from condemning the corruption of biblical discourse by Welsh Nonconformity, it

is only a small step to the implicit and radical implication that this corruption is inherent within the Bible itself. Not only does Evans's satire undermine Nonconformist patriarchy, it also unsettles the biblical foundations of that patriarchy. Indeed, at its most radical, Evans's satire suggests that sin and barbarity originate from within the Bible itself. Matilda's biblical allusion, for example – 'if the sons of men wear the habit of horses the daughters of God must go naked' – draws attention to the original biblical passage in Genesis 6:2: 'the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives *of all which they chose*' [my emphasis] – a passage which arguably gives sanction to Evan Rhiw's incestuous rape. Moreover, Evans's story also parallels – as well as inverts – the story of Lot and his two daughters [Genesis 19:30-8]. In the biblical version, it is the two daughters who deliberately intoxicate their father with drink in order to sleep with him and 'preserve' his 'seed'. Such a biblical antecedent does not require a great deal of twisting or perverting in order to displace the blame for Evan Rhiw's drunken rape of his daughter on to Matilda herself.

Similarly, Sadrach's attempts in 'A Father in Sion' to find biblical justification for his adultery are easily (too easily?) satisfied:

With Job he compared himself, for was not the Lord trying his servant to the uttermost? Would the all-powerful Big Man, the Big Man who delivered the Children of Israel from the hold of the Egyptians, give him a morsel of strength to bear his cross? Sadrach reminded God of his loneliness. Man was born to be mated, even as the animals in the fields. Without mate man was like an estate

without an overseer, or a field of ripe corn rotting for the reaping-hook. [*MP*, 50]

It can be argued that Sadrach's assertion that 'Man was born to be mated, even as the animals in the fields', is a deliberate twisting of Genesis 2:20, which stresses man's superiority to 'the animals in the fields': 'for Adam there was not found an help meet for him'. Indeed, throughout 'A Father in Sion', Sadrach manipulates biblical discourse in order to justify behaviour and conduct officially proscribed by that discourse: lust, avarice, bestial carnality etc. This linguistic manipulation, however, also serves to highlight the instability of the biblical text, the proximity and contiguity of what purport to be clear-cut oppositions between Good and Evil, the pure and impure, the sinner and the saved. Within Sadrach's self-justifying linguistic manoeuvres, for example, sin – what Nonconformity must continually disavow – is produced and propagated by the same discourse charged with its exclusion and suppression: a perversion of the divine word which reflects not only Sadrach's own inner corruption, but implies a more fundamental corruption within the divine order itself. As Jonathan Dollimore argues, perversion – which originally possessed a theological rather than sexual charge – 'originates in that which it subverts': its 'essence' is deviation or displacement. Through 'perverting' biblical discourse, Sadrach thus displaces (male) sin on to women, but, in doing so, reveals (in biblical terms) the most fundamental displacement of all: 'the means whereby responsibility for evil is displaced via Satan on to man and then on to woman'.¹⁴ By alluding to Genesis in order to justify his carnality, Sadrach forces a re-reading of the biblical verse, locating Adam's need for 'an help meet' within the context of an animal carnality: 'Man was born to be mated, even as the animals in

the fields.' Disturbingly, it is implied that sin was always already present in the prelapsarian paradise that was Eden; in short, that evil is an integral part of the divine order. As Old Ianto of the Road comments in 'The Devil in Eden' (though unaware of the full import of what he says), 'This is the Garden of Eden. . . . [H]ere God gave Adam the tongue that I am speaking in now' [*MP*, 89]!

While on the one hand, then, the biblical tone of *My People* is used to emphasise the extent to which the people of Manteg fail to live up to the Christian code, on the other hand, that tone, as Mary Jones points out, also implicitly criticises the Bible itself. To Jones, this apparent contradiction is a result of what she terms 'the ironic discrepancy between the New Testament and the Old'. She notes, for instance, that it is primarily the stories of the Old Testament that inspire Evans's imagination: the inhabitants of Evans's stories often act like Old Testament characters and, like the Israelites, construct a vicious, vengeful God in their own image. Indeed, the lies and deceit that characterise the dealings of Manteg's inhabitants with each other are reflected in the foundation story of the Chosen People: as Genesis 27:1-40 relates, it is through imposture and deception that Jacob attains the birthright of his elder brother Esau (the title of a proposed novel by Evans, 'Children of Jacob', thus contains a double-edged irony). Moreover, while it is possible to laugh at the anthropomorphising of God in *My People*, the superstitious references to 'the Big Man', and the homely similes which bring this 'Great Being' within the bounds of comprehension – 'His anger consumes like the fire which ate up the hay of Griffith Graig, though his mercy is as the waters of Morfa' [*MP*, 104]; 'swifter is the hand of the Lord than the water which turns Old Daniel's mill' [*MP*, 140] – such language is also uncomfortably

close to its biblical antecedents. The construction of God by the Welsh in their own image, for instance, bathetic as it may seem, parallels the Israelites' conception of a jealous, war-like being able to 'smite' their enemies – a God, that is, appropriate to an age of violent tribal warfare rather than peaceful agricultural production. Such parallels are even more pronounced in the behaviour of Manteg's inhabitants, which often echoes biblical events. In her vanity, for example, Betti ('The Woman who Sowed Iniquity') is like Jezebel or Potiphar's wife [MP, 95], and her oppression at the hands of a brutal husband and brother, and her condemnation by the community at large, is thus given effective biblical sanction. The biblical style thus 'gives rise to a two-fold irony', Jones concludes, playing off the Old against the New Testament, and locking Capel Sion and the Old Testament together 'in a way that reduces both to barbarity'.¹⁵

What Jones terms 'the ironic discrepancy' between Old and New Testaments is also evident in Evans's epistolic responses in the Welsh press to his various critics. In these letters, Evans adopts a messianic tone, denouncing Nonconformist corruption and hypocrisy in strident and declamatory phrases deeply revealing of the extent to which his subjectivity was embedded in a strongly biblical culture:

A Welsh Nonconformist preacher does not hate intolerance; he thrives on it. Because he feigns teetotalism abroad and gets drunk within closed doors, he shuts down public houses; because he sees more gain for himself in Liberalism than in Toryism, he makes of his chapel a Liberal committee-room; because he magnifies himself

greater than his congregation, he has come to believe that he is greater than God, and so he has fashioned his own god. He has bullied the peasant people into putting up ugly chapels on hillsides and in valleys, and has set himself ruler of the people. He is the hangman of our liberties and the enemy of God.¹⁶

Evans's central charge against Nonconformity is its hypocrisy, and it is no coincidence that in this passage and elsewhere he echoes Christ's condemnation of the Pharisees, a Jewish sect accused by Jesus of paying too much attention to *appearing* to be good rather than actually *practising* good:

Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. [Matthew 23:26-8]

Adopting a Christ-like tone, Evans condemns what he sees as a Pharisaical Nonconformity obsessed with external appearances and the equation of morality with respectability: 'Dear me, have I not put her in the harness loft? It is not respectable to let her out. Twm Tybach would have sent his wife to the madhouse of Carmarthen. But that is not Christian' [MP, 51]. As T. L. Williams comments, within such a society 'one's "sin" was less important than the *discovery* of one's

sin', and an obsessive adherence to the Sabbath (again characteristic of the Pharisees) could come to be seen as a sign of one's moral standing.¹⁷

This identification of Nonconformity as a Pharisaical religion is again, as I suggested above, indicative of the tension in *My People* between Old and New Testaments, a tension between two different value systems which amounts to different, and ultimately irreconcilable, conceptions of abjection. From a reading of the New Testament, it is clear, for example, that the Pharisees represent a particular strain of Old Testament belief, rooted in a strict, rigid adherence to the Law as dictated by God to Moses. As Kristeva illustrates, in Old Testament texts the 'clean and proper' status of the body is predicated upon a distinction between inside and outside, constructing a 'logical conception of impurity' as 'intermixture, erasing of differences, threat to identity'. In the Levitical prohibitions relating to food, disease, corpses and the maternal body, the common thread is 'the principle of identity without admixture, the exclusion of anything that breaks boundaries (flow, drain, discharge)' [*PH*, 102, 101, 103]. Within the New Testament, this inside/outside dichotomy is inverted by Christ's abolition of Old Testament taboos. Christ, for example, abolishes dietary taboos relating both to the types of food it is permitted to eat and those it can be eaten with, he heals the sick on the Sabbath and associates with lepers and the maimed – all forbidden under Levitical law. However, as Christ argues, 'I am come not to destroy [the law], but to fulfil [it]' [Matthew 5:17]. Abjection, and the concept of impurity upon which it is predicated, far from being abolished, is, through its interiorisation, made a permanent feature of human consciousness: no longer a rite exterior to the subject, it becomes a constitutive element of every speaking (and henceforward divided)

being. It is this interiorisation of abjection which, claims Kristeva, marks Christianity's most fundamental break with Judaism: 'abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within' [*PH*, 113]. As Christ repeatedly asserts in the face of Pharisee opposition, it is 'not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man' [Matthew 15:11]; it is the inner corruption, not the outward transgression, which is now of consequence. By depicting Nonconformity as a religion akin to that of the Pharisees, Evans therefore emphasises still further Nonconformity's similarities to an Old Testament (and hence barbaric) mode of religious observance.

However, to argue that this distinction in Evans's attitudes towards the Old and New Testaments is always neat, consistent and sharply defined would be to belie the extent of the tensions, complexities and ambiguities running not only through *My People* but the troubled relationship of Christianity in general towards the Old Testament. As Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett argue, to the Christian religion Old Testament scripture is both a source of authority and a potentially embarrassing contradiction:

[W]ithout the Greek Old Testament Christianity would lack both roots and the grand narrative which we see emerging in Luke and Acts. At the heart of *Christian* scripture (that is, the combined two Testaments) is a fundamental problem of identity and history. The Jesus of the Gospels is *both* the fulfilment of scripture *and* its destroyer.¹⁸

Far from being handed down in tablets of stone, assert Carroll and Prickett, the Christian canon – that is, the Bible as we know it today – is the product of a concerted attempt by the early Christian churches to reconcile this paradox within their sacred texts through the omission, re-ordering and selective translation of Jewish scripture.¹⁹ It is interesting to note, therefore, given what Evans regards as the ‘perversion’ of Christian doctrine by Nonconformist ministers, that Christianity as a religion is itself founded upon the manipulation for political and ideological purposes of ‘sacred’ texts.

This fundamental ambiguity, even contradiction, inherent within Christian attitudes towards the Old Testament finds certain parallels with Evans’s own relationship to religious language, particularly the Old Testament diction which inflects the narrative voice of so many of his stories. As has been stressed above, the peculiar syntax of the Old Testament possesses contrasting and potentially contradictory functions in *My People*: both to condemn characters such as Sadrach out of their own mouths and to invest the tales with a poetic grandeur and moral authority.²⁰ By manipulating biblical discourse for his own narrative ends, Evans implicates himself within the same Nonconformist culture he is ostensibly rejecting, and reveals (like Pedr) his own displaced attraction to what, through the grotesquerie of his language, he is simultaneously defiling.²¹ While this ambivalence towards Nonconformist culture and identity is identifiable throughout *My People* on a stylistic level, it can be seen more specifically in the inability of the narrator in ‘A Father in Sion’ to explain adequately the means by which Achsah was able to escape from her prison in the harness loft: ‘What occurred in the loft over the cowshed before dawn crept in through the window with the iron

bars I cannot tell you. God can' [MP, 54]. This appeal to an omniscience above and outside the story is, in the context of Evans's satirical aims, an unnecessary mystification – and, moreover, even appears to contradict those aims. From Sadrach's first line of dialogue, for instance – 'Dear people, on my way to Sion I asked God what He meant' [MP, 49] – it is clear that we, as readers, are intended to view Sadrach's religious rhetoric with more than a degree of scepticism. By gesturing towards an omniscience that it elsewhere discredits (and, moreover, in a way which echoes that of Sadrach), the narrator, as Simon Baker points out, 'appropriates the language which it condemns in order to make that condemnation possible'.²² The narrator of the story, like Evans, is contaminated by the corruption and hypocrisy (that is, the displacements and disavowals) of the culture and identity which he purports to reject – a fundamental paradox that, as I shall argue, possesses important implications for the sexual politics of *My People*, in particular the representation of the feminine/maternal body.

The Abject Maternal in 'Be This Her Memorial'

As previously discussed, the taboos and prohibitions found in Leviticus are elaborations of a more fundamental taboo relating to the maternal body. It is these taboos that institute patriarchy, constructing a disgust that disavows the subject's corporeal link with the maternal body and designates the feminine in the process as unclean and impure [PH, 113]. The importance of this analysis to a broader cultural understanding of *My People* cannot be underestimated, for it is this biblical conception of woman as a site of impurity that provides the social basis for

patriarchal power within Manteg society. By deploying an Old Testament diction as the stylistic basis of his narrative, Evans is himself implicated, however, within the patriarchy he condemns, exploiting (as he discredits) a patriarchal conception of the feminine as unclean and impure. This dependence upon categories of impurity that Evans elsewhere seeks to reject can be exemplified by a passage describing Nanni, the chief protagonist of 'Be This Her Memorial', during her penultimate appearance at a Capel Sion service:

Two sabbaths before the farewell sermon was to be preached Nanni came to Capel Sion with an ugly sore at the side of her mouth; repulsive matter oozed slowly from it, forming into a head, and then coursing thickly down her chin on to the shoulder of her black cape, where it glistened among the beads. On occasions her lips tightened, and she swished a hand angrily across her face.

‘Old Nanni,’ folk remarked while discussing her over their dinner-tables, ‘is getting as dirty as an old sow.’ [*MP*, 111]

Within this passage the feminine body is depicted as grotesque and monstrous in a way which is directly derivative of a Levitical conception of impurity as a transgression of boundaries, an inability to contain the body's materiality: 'flow, drain, discharge'. Indeed, the simile with which the congregation respond to Nanni – 'as dirty as an old sow' – can be seen as an attempt to negate her threat, to remove her to the other side of the border separating the human from the animal (though the ambivalent nature of the simile, which connects as well as separates the categories of human and animal, suggests the impossibility of doing this).

Clearly, however, the reader cannot help but sympathise with the congregation's comments. Thus, while the reason for Nanni's repulsiveness (patriarchal oppression) is undoubtedly condemned, the patriarchal culture that constructs Nanni *as* repulsive continues to be exploited.

This exploitation of a Levitical sense of impurity occurs throughout 'Be This Her Memorial'. Indeed, the story's chief theme – that of 'Nanni's great sacrifice' [MP, 108] – draws heavily upon the more outlandish episodes of the Old Testament, with its tales of sacrifice and blood offerings. However, these Old Testament elements are complicated by the title of the story, which refers not to the Old but to the New Testament, to Matthew 26:13, and a passage in which a woman of Bethany anoints Jesus, recognising him as the Messiah: 'Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.' By contrast, Evans's story is one of misrecognition on the part of Nanni: 'in her search for God she fell down and worshipped at the feet of a god' [MP, 108]. Whereas Jesus values the precious ointment with which the Bethany woman anoints him, the Respected Josiah Bryn-Bevan heedlessly gives Nanni's present away. This tension between Old and New Testaments in the story is an ambiguous one, however, for while Evans's biblical style blurs the boundary between Welsh Nonconformist society and the world of the Old Testament, in the process the religious authority invoked by this diction is also called into question. Furthermore, as I have illustrated, Evans's writing is itself corrupted by the values he seeks to reject. In abjecting the patriarchal values of Nonconformity and the Old Testament, Evans reinscribes those values – with all their horror of the feminine/maternal Other – within his own

textual practice. Indeed, as I illustrate below, the sense of horror which Evans invokes in 'Be This Her Memorial' is predicated upon precisely the same symbolic norms he is attempting to overthrow; in the identical motion that biblical/Nonconformist patriarchy is made monstrous through its abjection, the monstrosity of the feminine Other is equally conceded. It is Nanni's maternal power, for instance – a power figured in terms of incorporation – which makes her an object of fear in the story. In very Levitical terms, Nanni's 'threat' – a threat that emerges directly from her femininity – is to the differentiation upon which symbolic identity is founded.

The central focus of 'Be This Her Memorial' is undoubtedly the relationship between Nanni and the minister of Capel Sion, Josiah Bryn-Bevan. While the story possesses a strong realist dimension, charting in detail the economic minutiae of Nanni's poverty and oppression (we are told three times, for instance, that her weekly poor relief amounts to 3/9d; that she gives a tenth of this sum 'to the treasury of the Capel' [MP, 109]; and that, despite her extreme age, she is forced to work in the fields for her weekly allowance), these elements of social protest are complicated by the figuring of Nanni and Bryn-Bevan in terms of a mother/son dichotomy. Indeed, despite her age and exploited condition, there is a strong sense of the maternal or even matriarchal about Nanni – a fact emphasised (at least for English readers, to whom the name Nanni would be unfamiliar) by her name. In certain respects she seems to represent for the people of Manteg the timeless and the eternal, the illusory sense of stability formerly ensured by the child's specular identification with its mother. Significantly, for instance, Nanni pre-dates Bryn-Bevan's patriarchal order by an incalculable and unsignifiable

measurement of time: 'No one knew how old she was, for she said that she remembered the birth of each person that gathered in Capel Sion; she was so old that her age had ceased to concern' [MP, 108]. Most important, however, is her relationship to the infant Josiah, the patriarchal 'god' of Manteg whom she once cradled in her own arms: 'She helped to bring Josiah into the world; she swaddled him in her own flannel petticoat' [MP, 109]. Thus, not only does she pre-date Bryn-Bevan's rule, she also in a sense gave birth to that rule. While not a mother in fact, Nanni is very much a mother in spirit: 'when the boy, having obeyed the command of the Big Man, was called to minister to the congregation of Capel Sion, even Josiah's mother was not more vain than Old Nanni' [MP, 109]. It is the strength of Nanni's maternal love for Bryn-Bevan, however, which, as I will show, ultimately poses the greatest threat to his patriarchal power: a power predicated upon the abjection of the feminine from symbolic identity. This threat is pre-figured, I would suggest, in the image of the baby Josiah being 'swaddled' in Nanni's petticoat, the verb chosen possessing connotations of 'smothering' as well as nurturing. In addition, the image conveys a strong sense of intimacy, of a powerful physical connection between Nanni and Bryn-Bevan akin to (but also parodic of) that between the Virgin Mary and her infant Christ.

Nanni's figuring as a maternal presence within Manteg is thus of extreme importance to an understanding of 'Be This Her Memorial', and is a marker of her ambiguous role in the story as both victim of and threat to patriarchal order. As Elizabeth Gross comments:

Maternity is . . . the site of the semiotic and the precondition of the symbolic. It is a region which requires territorialization, and marking by the proprietorial name of the father – that is, it must be restricted and contained in order for the father's law to be accepted. She must be positioned as his and thus 'branded' by his name.²³

The maternal, then, must be 'owned' and subjugated in order to defuse its continuing threat of eliding identity's founding differentiation. The reduction of Nanni's social status to that of vassal, her labour appropriated as 'the property of the community' [*MP*, 111], can thus be seen not simply in terms of economic exploitation, but as symptomatic of patriarchy's fear of uncontained femininity. It is notable, for instance, how Nanni is continually exhorted by Abel Shones, the Officer for Poor Relief, to accept what Lacan terms the 'Law of the Father': 'each pay-day [Shones] never forgot to remind the crooked, wrinkled, toothless old woman how much she owed to him and God' [*MP*, 108]. Ironically enough, however, such exhortations seem unnecessary in Nanni's case, for it is her own maternal feelings for Bryn-Bevan – feelings which also paradoxically threaten to overwhelm an independent sense of identity – which produce her willing subjection to his patriarchal law.²⁴ It is maternal love, for example, which leads Nanni to give 'a tenth of her income to the treasury of the Capel' and 'to regard Josiah as greater than God' [*MP*, 109]. Like Sadrach's wife Achsah in 'A Father in Sion', Nanni is complicit in her own oppression.

This last sentiment of Nanni's is indicative of the threat her maternal feelings might pose, her mother's idolisation of Bryn-Bevan threatening to erase

the system of differences on which his patriarchal law is predicated. I would argue, for example, that Nanni's unconscious belief that Bryn-Bevan is 'greater than God', and the striking image of prostration by which this sentiment is conveyed – 'in her search for God she fell down and worshipped at the feet of a god' [*MP*, 108] – mark not only the extent to which Nanni has internalised and accepted the Law of the Father, but also the degree to which her maternal sentiments have corrupted – or, rather, highlight the corruption of – this Law from within. For in replacing God with Bryn-Bevan, Nanni undermines the biblical foundations on which Bryn-Bevan's secular authority is built, not only erasing the man/God distinction established at the time of the Fall, but profaning the divine name and breaking the biblical injunction forbidding the worship of idols.²⁵ Nanni's maternal sentiments thus breach the symbolic, not through direct opposition, but, paradoxically and perversely, precisely through her adherence and willing subjection to patriarchal law: a subjection so intense that it collapses the boundaries upon which that law is predicated. Bryn-Bevan's vain and hypocritical encouragement of Nanni's maternal sentiments thus carries the seeds of his own destruction.

If Nanni's subjection to the symbolic is inextricably linked to her position as representative of the maternal, then, it is also the point at which that law is breached or ruptured from within. Such a rupture is inscribed in the opening paragraph of 'Be This Her Memorial', in which the threat Nanni poses to patriarchal Nonconformity is prefigured in the galloping parenthesis that explodes across the measured tones of the narrator:

Mice and rats, as it is said, frequent neither churches nor poor men's homes. The story I have to tell you about Nanni – the Nanni who was hustled on her way to prayer-meeting by the Bad Man, who saw the phantom mourners bearing away Twm Tybach's coffin, who saw the Spirit Hounds and heard their moanings two days before Issac Penparc took wing – the story I have to tell you contradicts that theory. [*MP*, 108]

If Nanni is now contained by Nonconformity's symbolic order, she nevertheless remains a parenthetical rupture within that order, a remnant of a superstitious, heterogeneous past rich with folkloric and almost pantheistic traditions. Moreover, Nanni is presented in this paragraph as the privileged interlocutor between the living and the dead, the material world and the spiritual one that surrounds it. As such, she both parallels and menaces Bryn-Bevan's own privileged position as the interpreter of the Big Man's wishes to Capel Sion's congregation (Bryn-Bevan announces his intention to leave Capel Sion, for instance, in terms of a 'call' from God [*MP*, 109, 110]). Whereas Bryn-Bevan invokes the oneness of a forbidding patriarchal presence that both separates and unifies, Nanni's affiliations are with a heterogeneous spirit world that mixes and fragments, transgressing the boundaries separating the living from the dead. Though the superstitious nature of Nanni's own religious beliefs suggests the shaping influence of this folkloric past on Nonconformity, it remains a past coded with the plurality of the feminine, and as such a past that can never be successfully integrated by the stabilising and unifying tenets of a patriarchal Nonconformity.

Thus, in spite of her willing subjection to patriarchal rule, Nanni remains a figure of *fear*, coded as abject and impure, a threat to symbolism and the power of Nonconformity's patriarchal order. The threat which Nanni embodies is exemplified by her encounter with Sadrach Danyrefail, a powerful patriarch in Manteg, who is nevertheless rendered speechless (for the first and only time in *My People*) when he confronts Nanni 'to commandeer her services':

Sadrach was going to say hard things to Nanni, but the appearance of the gleaming-eyed creature that drew back the bolts of the door frightened him and tied his tongue. He was glad that the old woman did not invite him inside, for from within there issued an abominable smell as might have come from the boiler of the witch who one time lived on the moor. [*MP*, 111]

The sight of Nanni reduces Sadrach to a state of abjection. Rendered speechless by an overwhelming sensory experience which encroaches over the boundaries dividing self from other, Sadrach is temporarily displaced from his position as speaking subject, foreshadowing the silent horror of Bryn-Bevan in the story's concluding paragraph. In this encroachment, it is Nanni's 'abominable smell' that most repels Sadrach, the fear of unwillingly imbibing into the physical confines of his body/self Nanni's repulsive otherness. Significantly, this fear of incorporation, of losing one's identity, is specifically linked to a fear of the feminine and what Kristeva terms its 'demoniacal potential' [*PH*, 65] ('the witch who . . . lived on the moor'). The smell from Nanni's hut initiates primeval fears of being devoured, reminding Sadrach of 'the boiler of the witch' and vigorously repelling him from

the odorous (womb-like?) space of Nanni's hut – a space which seems almost a displacement of a male fear of the female genitals and what Barbara Creed terms their 'castrating' potential. Indeed, Nanni, like 'the cannibalistic witch' of the 'Hansel and Gretel' story, seems to function in this passage 'as an expression of the dyadic mother; the all-encompassing maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal period who threatens symbolically to engulf the infant, thus posing a threat of psychic obliteration'.²⁶

However, Nanni's potential threat is not brought to its full fruition until the final shocking paragraph. In a phrase replete with irony, we are told by the narrator that Bryn-Bevan has decided to hearken to 'a call from a wealthy sister church in Aberystwyth' [*MP*, 109] and leave Manteg – a decision which leaves Nanni '[b]roken with grief' [*MP*, 109]. Despite her appalling poverty, Nanni scrapes together enough money to buy a Bible for Bryn-Bevan as a farewell gift. Noting Nanni's absence from his final sermon, Bryn-Bevan nevertheless thanks her for 'her sacrifice', but then immediately gives her gift away to Sadrach Danyrefail [*MP*, 111-2]. The true nature of Nanni's terrible 'sacrifice', its true cost in economic and human terms, is not revealed to Bryn-Bevan until the following morning, when he decides to call at her cottage:

There was no movement from Nanni. Mishtir Bryn-Bevan went on his knees and peered at her. Her hands were clasped tightly together, as though guarding some great treasure. The minister raised himself and prised them apart with the ferrule of his walking-stick. A roasted rat revealed itself. Mishtir Bryn-Bevan stood for

several moments spellbound and silent; and in the stillness the rats crept boldly out of their hiding places and resumed their attack on Nanni's face. The minister, startled and horrified, fled from the house of sacrifice. [*MP*, 112]

Like Sadrach before him, Bryn-Bevan is rendered 'silent' by what he sees, unable to inscribe a linguistic meaning upon the scene before him. To Kristeva, the corpse is 'the most sickening of wastes . . . a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled' [*PH*, 3-4]. I would argue, however, that it is not simply the sight of Nanni's dead body, or the rats on which she had fed and that now, in turn, feed upon her, that reduces Bryn-Bevan to a state of abjection. As the phrase 'the house of sacrifice' indicates, it is the (until now) unrevealed extent of Nanni's sacrifice that horrifies Bryn-Bevan, its terrifying dissolution of the boundaries separating and safeguarding the minister from Nanni's abject status. This sacrifice horrifies because it undermines the symbolic law guaranteeing Bryn-Bevan's identity as a speaking subject; it is a grotesque intrusion of the abject that he cannot render meaningful.

Nanni's sacrifice thus operates along what Kristeva terms maternity's two contradictory axes (those of the social symbolic and the natural reproductive),²⁷ thereby simultaneously affirming and subverting the authority of symbolic law. The extreme nature of Nanni's sacrifice, for instance, is an affirmation not only of the power of Nonconformity, but also of a corporeal contiguity between Nanni and Bryn-Bevan that the latter must disavow. As Kristeva explains, sacrifice is a metaphorical act, operating between two 'irreconcilable terms', connecting them

‘necessarily in violent fashion, violating at the same time as it posits it the semantic isotopy of each’ [*PH*, 95]. It is the impurity of Nanni’s sacrifice that poses the threat to Bryn-Bevan, connecting him to the abject maternal he must seek to disavow. Nanni’s abject status – stressed throughout the story in terms of her physicality (her weeping sores) and her femininity (the witch) – is emphasised further in the details of what Bryn-Bevan witnesses in Nanni’s hut. Nanni’s sacrifice, for example, has been achieved through the eating of rats, an unclean animal, and these animals are now in turn feasting upon her, this double devouring movement blurring the boundaries between human and animal. In the violent motion of Nanni’s sacrifice, Bryn-Bevan is himself implicated in this abjection – as, moreover, is the divine word of the Bible with which he is presented (or at least the Old Testament part of it). This, of course, creates an ambiguity, for in revealing the horror of Nonconformity Evans invokes the same categories of abomination and impurity upon which patriarchy is predicated. While re-asserting the power of the feminine in ‘Be This Her Memorial’, Evans reinforces patriarchal fear; while he ferociously attacks Nonconformist patriarchy, he continues to invoke the same categories of disgust – categories that always return to the impurity of the maternal/feminine – by which the patriarchal structures of society are perpetuated. This is not to dismiss Evans’s work as misogynistic, but to make the point that Evans could never stand outside the culture he was rejecting. Nonconformity had already *positioned* Evans as a subject, and he could never entirely escape his discursive inheritance. As Friedrich Nietzsche once commented, to condemn the ‘aberrations’ of previous generations ‘and regard ourselves as free of them . . . does not alter the fact that we originate in them’.²⁸ It is Evans’s attempt to break free from this cultural history, however, which arguably gives his writing its force and

power; it is precisely his position as an (unwilling) subject of Nonconformity that enables him to write *against* that culture with such terrific and terrifying effect.

¹ Adamson, *Class, Ideology and the Nation*, pp. 117-8.

² Williams, *When Was Wales?*, pp. 239-40. What Williams terms the 'remoteness' of 'the worlds of the *gwerin* and the *working class*' is strikingly illustrated by the following exchange, typical of the time, between the Reverend John Hughes Edwards, a Liberal candidate in the 1911 general election, and his Labour party opponent, the miners' leader V. Hartshorn:

Hughes: It [socialism] is crying for the moon. What are its first fruits in Mid Glam? Look around our churches. What is depleting them of young men? Socialism.

Hartshorn: Clothed in the garb of religious rectitude, and wearing the Nationalist colours, you hide the grinning skeleton of a political hack.

Quoted in Peter Stead, 'The Language of Edwardian Politics', in D. Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), pp. 156-7.

³ R. F. W. Rees, 'The Celt and Realism', *The Globe* (23 Oct. 1915); J. K. Prothero, 'Wales and the Obi Man', *New Witness* (13 June 1916); *The Globe* (23 Oct. 1915); Anon., Review of *My People*, *The English Review* (Dec. 1915); and *New Witness* (13 June 1916). All quoted in Mary Jones, 'A Changing Myth: The Projection of the Welsh in the Short Stories of Caradoc Evans', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, No. 81 (1985), p. 90. The term 'obi' refers to a kind of witchcraft originating in Africa and practised by some West Indians. I am not aware of what the term 'hlobonga' refers to.

⁴ See John Harris's introduction to the Seren edition of *My People* (p. 41). I am indebted to Harris's lengthy introduction for much of the historical and biographical material cited in this chapter.

⁵ See Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* [1968], revised ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), pp. 60-75; Gwyn Jones, *Background to Dylan Thomas and Other Explorations* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), pp. 72-88; and Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris [1985] (London: Paladin, 1987), pp. 172, 177.

⁶ See Nicholas Murray, 'Mr Evans, Mr Rushdie and the White Settlers', *New Welsh Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [11] (Winter 1990-91), pp. 51-2.

⁷ Gwyn Jones, 'Caradoc was the daddy of us all', *The Western Mail* (20 Aug 1960), p. 5. For Evans's status as Anglo-Welsh writing's 'founding father', see Meic Stephens (ed.), *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 228; and Anthony Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982), p. 155. For alternative views, see Raymond Garlick and Roland Mathias (eds.), *Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1990* (Bridgend: Seren, 1992); M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), pp. 1-24; and Katie Gramich's introduction to Allen Raine, *Queen of the Rushes: A Tale of the Welsh Revival* [1906] (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998), pp. 7-9.

⁸ Quoted in Williams, *When Was Wales?*, pp. 284-5.

⁹ Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 113.

¹⁰ Quoted in Trevor Williams, 'The Birth of a Reputation: Early Welsh Reaction to the Work of Caradoc Evans', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol. 19, No. 44 (1971), pp. 164, 150, 159.

¹¹ Quoted in T. L. Williams, *Caradoc Evans*, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), p. 3.

¹² Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, p. 91.

¹³ Derec Llwyd Morgan, *The Great Awakening in Wales* [1981], trans. Dyfnallt Morgan (London: Epworth Press, 1988), pp. 280, 282.

¹⁴ Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 130; Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* [1998] (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 139, 140.

¹⁵ Jones, 'A Changing Myth', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, No. 81, p. 91.

¹⁶ *The Western Mail* (November 15, 1917); quoted in Williams, 'The Birth of a Reputation', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol. 19, No. 44, p. 167.

¹⁷ Williams, *Caradoc Evans*, p. 5. For Christ's attack on the Pharisees's interpretation of Sabbath law, see Mark 2:23-8 and 3:1-5.

¹⁸ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (eds.), *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 398-9; also pp. xiii-xix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

²⁰ A further irony: the style that we recognise instinctively as 'biblical' is itself an 'invention' by the translators of the Authorized Version (see *ibid.*, pp. xxviii). As John Harris relates, it was the English as much as the Welsh Bible that inspired Evans's distinctive literary style [*MP*, 9].

²¹ A comparison might be drawn with the relationship of some gay men to masculinity. Citing Leo Bersani's work on this subject, Jonathan Dollimore comments that 'gay machismo', rather than being 'straightforwardly a parodic subversion of masculinity', 'includes a worshipful tribute to, a "yearning toward" the straight machismo style and behaviour it defiles' (Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in D. Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 209; Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss*, p. 304).

²² Simon Baker, 'Caradoc Evans's "A Father in Sion" and Contemporary Critical Theory', *New Welsh Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [11] (Winter 1990-91), p. 50.

²³ Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, pp. 96-7.

²⁴ See also Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 165: 'In relation to entry into the symbolic, the mother is represented as an essentially ambiguous figure. She teaches the child through its toilet training to separate itself from all signs of its animal origins, yet she is also associated with the world of nature – and consequently denigrated – because of her reproductive and mothering functions. She teaches the infant to abhor what she herself comes to represent within the signifying practices of the symbolic. An ideology which denigrates woman is also endorsed by woman: patriarchal ideology works in and through woman. . . .'

²⁵ Genesis 3:22; Leviticus 19:4; 26:1. See also *PH*, pp. 95-6.

²⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, p. 109.

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora, and Leon Roudiez [1980] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 241.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* [1874], in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 76; quoted in Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss*, p. 235.

4

‘From the first declension of the flesh’: Childhood and Immaturity in Dylan Thomas’s Early Poetry

In the autumn of 1934, Caradoc Evans was visited at his Aberystwyth home by two aspiring young writers from south Wales, Glyn Jones and Dylan Thomas. Of this literary pilgrimage, Thomas wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson:

Last week-end I spent in Aberystwyth with Caradoc Evans. He’s a great fellow. We made a tour of the pubs in the evening, drinking to the eternal damnation of the Almighty & the soon-to-be-hoped-for destruction of the tin Bethels. The university students love Caradoc, & pelt him with stones whenever he goes out.¹

Though this account of his weekend with Caradoc may appear somewhat fanciful,² Thomas’s respect for Evans’s iconoclastic challenge to the sacred cow of Nonconformity seems genuine enough. The colourful little sketch conveying this admiration is curiously at odds, however, with the political earnestness characteristic of Evans’s own literary prose: while Evans deploys the language and rhythms of the Bible in order to reinforce a powerful political message, the playfulness of Thomas’s own prose style, its exaggerated whimsicality and bathetic turn of phrase, serves rather to deflect attention from any political point the passage may be making. Indeed, what is foregrounded by the passage is not any ostensible content (Thomas’s visit to Evans, the moral bankruptcy of

Nonconformity) but the passage itself as writing, its playful artifice and carefully structured delivery. The significance of the events described, it might be said, ends with the story, the events themselves existing only to serve that story.

Of course, given the very different social and cultural milieu of his middle-class Swansea upbringing, Thomas's relationship to Nonconformity could never be as bitterly personal as that of Evans. Separated from the rural, Welsh-speaking Wales of his parents' generation by class, language and geographical location, Thomas was brought up at one remove from the Nonconformist society lambasted by Evans in *My People*; intimate, through family connections, with the social and moral imperatives of this society, he was nevertheless largely free from their direct influence and coercive power. As John Goodby and Christopher Wigginton remark, 'very different forces intersected in Thomas than in Evans; his upbringing was freethinking, his surroundings suburban and his literary and political contexts more radical and cosmopolitan'.³ It is important to stress, though, as Goodby and Wigginton do, that Thomas's positioning outside Nonconformist culture did not automatically imply an insider's knowledge of English culture.⁴ As Tony Conran comments, the English language in Thomas's family 'was no more than a generation or two old', too short a time for its cultural values 'to be natural'.⁵ This is an important point, Thomas's liminal and hybrid positioning between and across established linguistic/cultural boundaries being, I believe, of major significance to any critical discussion of his work (as, indeed, it is to any Anglo-Welsh writer of the 'first flowering' period).

Such an assertion invites further analysis, not just in terms of Thomas's ambivalent relationship to normative models of Welsh and English identity, but of his tendency – evident in the above letter to Johnson – to adopt a flippant and mock serious tone when discussing political engagement and ideological commitment. While such attitudes have, in their apparent refusal of adult responsibility, contributed enormously towards Thomas's critical and biographical reputation for childishness and immaturity, it is my contention in this chapter that such 'evidence' of a failure to mature is most productively viewed not in terms of any personal or pathological failings on Thomas's part, but as a phenomenon intimately connected with his liminal positioning on the boundaries between linguistic and cultural domains. By viewing Thomas in this way – that is, in terms of cultural circumstance rather than individual pathology – it is possible to suggest significant parallels between Thomas's own writing and that of other Anglo-Welsh writers of his generation. A similar nexus of hybridity, a perceived failure to mature, and a corresponding sense of political irresponsibility is illustrated nicely, for instance, by Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village*, a novel which, though published in the 1950s, looks back at the inter-war period in which Thomas's first collections of poetry were published. In an important and illuminating passage, the novel's narrator and protagonist Trystan, disturbed by his friend Mabli's new-found nationalism, berates his own inability to feel with any great passion the injustices of his people:

[A]s the talk of the tea table went on around me I wondered at myself. Why was it that I, coming from the desperate and squalid industrialism of Ystrad, had remained apart from those in college

who, without themselves having lived there, saw clearly the iniquities of that industrialism and desired passionately to end them? Why had I not matured more rapidly? Compared with many of my contemporaries I seemed unawakened, not much older, except as a painter, than when I first left Ystrad. I was happy really only when I had a paint brush in my hand and a canvas before me. Or when I was receiving uninterruptedly what I could use from the shoals of impressions flooding towards me. [VCV, 286]

While, as we shall see, Trystan's equation of personal maturity with political commitment adopts a line taken by many Thomas critics, his belief that the demands of art and politics are incompatible is clearly consonant with the Thomas who argued in a review of Stephen Spender's poem *Vienna* that 'In a poem . . . the poetry must come first; what negates or acts against the poem must be subjugated to the poetry which is essentially indifferent to whatever philosophy, political passion or gang-belief it embraces.'⁶ Unlike Thomas, however, Trystan's response to his 'failure' to commit politically is characterised by a considerable degree of anxiety and guilt; his explication of the reasons for this failure, though, provides a useful commentary on the deeply attractive nature (particularly for the artist) of Thomas's 'apolitical' stance. Balanced against his sense of guilt and ideological betrayal, for instance, is a recognition by Trystan of the narrowing of focus that commitment to a political/religious ideal entails – an acknowledgement made clear in the contrast between, on the one side, the nationalist zeal and religious devotion of Mabli and his grandmother respectively, and on the other his

own complex and self-consciously artistic appreciation of life's 'shoals of impressions':

Why did I not feel more deeply about these things? I took them for granted – religion, socialism, freedom for Wales, they all seemed so obviously desirable that I could not feel they demanded more of me than agreement. Then why was it that people wished me to devote myself to the causes in which they believed? Why were there so many voices? My grandmother had called and now Mabli was demanding a different dedication. And when a person had such an enthusiasm he viewed the whole of existence, I observed, in terms of it, everything he saw, read, thought, either confirmed and so related him or else was antagonistic and abhorrent. [*VCV*, 286-7]

In drawing this comparison between the ideological fervour of others and his own coldness to such narrow systems of thought, Trystan not only locates his refusal of ideological commitment within a particular historical moment – the splintering of Welsh identity into a number of competing political, cultural and religious traditions during the inter-war period – but makes a broader point about the partial nature of such spiritual and national narratives, their disavowal of life's chaotic and paradoxical disorder. Calling to mind the contrast between Mabli's nationalist reading of a certain book and his own more richly aesthetic response to the same text, Trystan can only conclude that 'Mabli and I had not been reading the same book' [*VCV*, 287].

Trystan's conception of maturity in this passage, then, and his feelings towards it, are confused, complex and ambiguous, invoking (while simultaneously problematising) a teleological narrative of personal development from carefree childhood to adult responsibility – a narrative itself encapsulated in the *Bildungsroman* form of the novel as a whole. If on one level, *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village* endorses this normative narrative of development, equating maturity with integration into a stable symbolic identity, it also actively undermines this narrative through a sensitive awareness of the limitations of such identities and the extent to which they are underpinned by the interpellative power of normative categories such as the mature and the adult. This subversive element to Jones's text is evident, moreover, not only in the overt form of Trystan's mental soliloquies, but in the attraction of the narrative voice towards the genre of the grotesque, a mode of writing which, in its highlighting of the permeability of the 'bounded' body/self, collapses the boundaries between the conceptual categories underpinning the production of stable, ordered identities.⁷ Importantly, as in so much of Glyn Jones's fiction, this grotesque vision of the world is identified in *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village* as a particular quality of the child, who is seen as possessing an inherent ability to perceive life's jarring incongruities in a way which the adult, protected/imprisoned by ideological filters, cannot; the child, in short, draws our attention to what we as adults generally choose to ignore or pass over, and, in so doing, reminds us of how strange the so-called 'familiar' world around us actually is. As Tony Brown comments, in relation to Jones's short stories, 'the child's perception – observant, unjudging, unconstrained by decorum – is a perfect means by which to engage the world's beauty, its squalor, its oddness; to engage its wholeness. The child can make the unconventional connections

which the adult mind would either not see or would reject on grounds of taste or inappropriateness.’⁸

The identification in *The Valley, The City, The Village* of grotesque modes of perception with the childlike and the immature is paralleled within Thomas criticism, the obsession with corporeal process characteristic of Thomas’s early work often being cited (as I illustrate below) as evidence of both a poetic and personal immaturity. It is thus interesting to note that Thomas’s early poetry, with its grotesque disruptions of the traditional categories stabilising meaning and value, held a particular fascination for the young Glyn Jones and was an important influence in the subsequent development of Jones’s own writing, in both prose and verse. As Tony Brown has remarked, ‘Perhaps more than anything this was what Glyn Jones found exciting and liberating in Thomas’s work: that one need not be bound by decorums of register and of English literary practice.’⁹ ‘Exciting and liberating’ Jones undoubtedly found Thomas, but the transgression that characterised the latter (in life as well as work) was also a source of deep anxiety. Social and biographical factors certainly played a part in creating this ambivalence: Jones was powerfully influenced by his Nonconformist upbringing in Merthyr’s respectable Clare Street, dominated by the forceful character of his mother with her strong concern for order and decency; in opposition to this, though, as both his journals and fiction testify, was a deep attraction towards the dirty, the physically sensual and the unrespectable, a strong desire to break free from the constraints and frustrations of bourgeois respectability.¹⁰ Such tensions undoubtedly emerge within Jones’s fiction, and it is tempting to see his inability to reconcile these two poles of existence reflected both in the displacement of grotesque modes of

perception onto child narrators and in Trystan's equation of immaturity with such modes of perception.

Such a displacement of the grotesque – a mode of perception which confounds the binarisms implicit within 'mature' narratives of identity – lends credence to the suspicion that the values and assumptions that maturity as a conceptual category helps to hold in place are not readily divorcible from the broader bourgeois project to delimit and contain the body that I have outlined in previous chapters. Viewed as such, it is possible to argue that the charge of immaturity is itself an act of abjection, an attempt to displace outside the boundaries of the self that which is perceived to threaten or undermine it. Indeed, by invoking the personal and the pathological the charge of immaturity is made all the more effective, negating any potential threat to normative authority by dismissing that threat as nothing more than a failure to mature on the part of particular individuals – a strategy which helps to ensure that subjects internalise normative values and become responsible for the policing of their own behaviour. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that personal attacks on Thomas's failings (in both life and work) might themselves be embedded within a broader discursive framework, being indicative, perhaps, of the threat that cultural hybridity, and indeterminacy in general, pose to the autonomy and differentiation guaranteeing English bourgeois identity. Viewed from this perspective, critical condemnation of Thomas for his failure (or even refusal) to 'grow up' as both a poet and a man – his alleged personal and poetic irresponsibility – becomes an easy means of containing this threat through its displacement onto the category of the immature. The nature of Thomas's threat and the poetry in which it was embodied will be one focus of

this chapter, but I want first to strengthen my initial suggestion of a connection between the immature and the abject by exploring more thoroughly the interrelationships between immaturity, the body, and bourgeois identity. To this end, I will begin by examining the concept of the child, and its correlate the immature, from a wider historical and cultural perspective.

Constructing the Child

Strange though it may seem in our child-conscious age, in historical terms the child has only been with us for a relatively short time. The child, in fact, is a largely modern invention which only emerged hesitantly as a discursive and conceptual category during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and did not achieve the cultural centrality that it enjoys today until well into the nineteenth. Before this period, as Philippe Ariés comments, ‘there was no place for childhood’: the child as a conceptual and thus biological and social category was simply not there.¹¹ This is an important point, for if we accept Ariés’s analysis (and it is worth pointing out that it has been contested)¹² we are drawn to conclude that the emergence of the child as a distinct conceptual category coincided to a remarkable degree with the growing cultural and political hegemony of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the child achieved its greatest prominence within discourse – whether literary, sociological or scientific – at a time when, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the bourgeoisie felt secure enough to start extending the regulatory norms of their moral and bodily values to Britain’s working class (and particularly, through education reform, working-class children). This conjunction of phenomena – the

emergence of the child, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the development of a specifically modern concept of the body – is more than coincidental, and illustrates how the construction of bourgeois identity through abjection took on a number of different, but mutually supportive, cultural forms. Indeed, depictions of the child in bourgeois discourse, like depictions of the working-class or colonial Other, played an integral but inherently ambivalent role in the construction and maintenance of normative bourgeois models of identity. As was the case with working-class and colonial representation, bourgeois depictions of the child attempted to affirm the ‘closed’ and integrated unity of the bourgeois body through displacing its antithesis – the hybrid, non-differentiated, ‘grotesque’ body of the bourgeois unconscious – *outside of* the bourgeois self and onto the figure of the child. In the process, the child became a locus for a complex and often contradictory set of desires and interdicts – as is evidenced, I will argue later, in both the poetry of Dylan Thomas and its (largely negative) critical reception in the post-war decades.

One way in which the child became a strategic counter in the long campaign to naturalise bourgeois identity was through its coding as Other. Defined in terms of a purity and innocence lost by the adult world, the child, says James Kincaid, was constructed as essentially an absence, a hollow receptacle which could be filled with all that was unassimilable by the normative bourgeois self. As a result, the child came to be the carrier of a contradictory set of cultural needs and anxieties, the repository of both our deepest fears but also of our most guilty pleasures. As Kincaid puts it, ‘The child carries for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasures so great we would not, without the child, know what to do

with them.’¹³ In fact, the ‘pleasures’ which Kincaid talks about are themselves often sources of anxiety, the cultural celebration of childhood as a time of carefree innocence masking an equally pervasive denigration of those who (in the eyes of society) refuse to ‘grow up’ and leave such pleasures behind. As we shall see below, normative discourses in society regularly deploy terms such as ‘regressive’, ‘infantile’ and ‘narcissistic’ in a negative, pejorative and arguably hysterical way, dismissing as pathologically immature those who, through their refusal to accept the bourgeois social compact, blur the defining and differentiating boundary between adult and child. This deployment of child-related language is especially noticeable in discussions of non-normative sexual behaviour, particularly that of paedophilia and homosexuality – ‘perversions’, one would think, that were the complete antithesis of the purported innocence and purity of the child.¹⁴ What appear to be polar opposites, then, are often revealed in such discourse to be intimate bedfellows; boundaries between adult and child, the sexual and the non-sexual, the innocent and the perverse, collapse and break down at the point of their most strident assertion. In Kincaid’s formulation, ‘As we regress, push back to the child, into the heart of innocence, we seem to find the foulest depravity.’¹⁵ This fundamental ambivalence bisecting representations of the child – viewed jointly as the embodiment of both our worst nightmares and our deepest desires – is reflected also in our attitudes towards children, which, as Jeni Williams points out, tend to vacillate unstably ‘between the protection of angels and the surveillance of demons’.¹⁶ Like those other bourgeois fictions of desire and repudiation, the ‘angel of the house’ and the ‘noble savage’, the angelic child invariably threatens to slide into its demonic opposite.

It is therefore not so much the child *per se* that is deemed to threaten the social order (indeed, safely excluded, it is the child which actively defines the adult bourgeois self), but the elision of the ideological boundaries (those dividing the sexual from the non-sexual, innocence from experience) that separate and differentiate it from the adult. Moreover, constructed as the child is in terms of a largely ungendered asexuality, such a blurring of conceptual categories is rarely separable *from* issues of gender and sexuality. Within literary studies, this is evidenced by the type of moralist criticism popularised by F. R. Leavis during the 1930s, a critic who regarded all literature which transgressed normative boundaries of gender and sexuality with suspicion or even outright hostility. To combat what he perceived to be the pernicious influences of such ‘immoral’ (or amoral) literature, Leavis initiated in his highly influential journal *Scrutiny* a new school of criticism which aimed to reconstruct English literary studies as a vigorous, scientific and, above all, ‘masculine’ discipline that would instil the ‘manly’ qualities of moral and intellectual rigour in its adherents. Writers such as Percy Shelley and the Brontë sisters who failed to conform to this bourgeois masculine ideal, encouraging, as the Leavisites saw it, perverse and effeminate values through their work, were sidelined and written out of Leavis’s account of English literature’s ‘Great Tradition’ – a tradition which, while almost exclusively masculine and middle class, was also posited as universal in the values and experiential qualities that it enshrined and promoted.¹⁷

Importantly, far from being peripheral to a discourse of the child, such criticism (sardonically termed ‘perversion-hunting’ by one recent critic)¹⁸ drew heavily upon constructions of the child as Other to the adult in order to code

perceived sexual transgression and effeminacy as immaturity and regression. Denys Thompson, for instance, taking his lead from Leavis, detected in the writings of the Romantic essayist Charles Lamb a lack of masculine vigour, and a largely emotional and feminine appeal, which he saw as characteristic of a 'regressive mind, shrinking from full consciousness'.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Jan B. Gordon, in a relatively recent discussion of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (and therefore testament to the pervasive influence of Leavisite ideals), is able, through an assumption of an implicit connection between homosexuality, narcissistic immaturity and artistic weakness, to slide from literary and aesthetic considerations into personal and moral judgement:

The homosexual in jail . . . is the ultimate reduction of the self-contained, reflex image. And *De Profundis* is the confession of an individual no longer capable of distinguishing self from false self, where all subjects have become objects. Oscar Wilde's condition, in brief, is the one art form where parody, gossip, the epigram, failed development manifested in the denial of growth, and the dehumanization that is part of the pornographic experience all conspire in an utterance that is the pretence of a failed autobiography.²⁰

Seen as an inability (or even refusal) to differentiate, immaturity (or 'failed development') is thus posited as co-extensive with the non-differentiation of sexual perversion, both of which are implicitly contrasted and found wanting with a normative, 'mature' heterosexuality – a sexuality, that is, capable (in contrast to the

homosexual) of acknowledging difference. This equation of 'perversity' and immaturity – that is, the pervert as the child who refuses to grow up – enabled Leavisite criticism to develop a vocabulary of pathology that, in its appeal to the natural and the biological, effectively obscured the ideological foundations of its own critical positioning. The child thus served a strategically critical function, aiding the bourgeoisie in their endless struggle to differentiate themselves from the contaminating (object) discourses and bodies of their 'low' Others. The cost of this manoeuvre, however, was a fundamental reconfiguring of the child: in addition to being coded as innocence and purity personified, immaturity became tainted indelibly with the depraved, the perverse and the sexually indeterminate – a corruption that simultaneously blurred the oppositions between innocence and experience, the sexual and the non-sexual, that the child was supposed to affirm. Having been figured primarily as corporeal absence, the child had in fact become *more*, not less, susceptible to being filled by the undifferentiated bodily plenitude of the perverse and the grotesque.

This typically Leavisite critical manoeuvre – involving the displacement onto the immature of all that is incompatible with normative bourgeois identity – is also evident in much Dylan Thomas criticism. Moreover, even more so than Wilde, Thomas's critical reputation has suffered considerably from a refusal by many critics to distinguish clearly between events in the life and words on the page, the latter often being seen as simply a passive reflection of the former. In consequence, Thomas's poetics have tended to be presented as somehow analogous with both the chaos of his personal life (the troubled marriage, the debts, the heavy alcohol consumption) and the youthful age at which much of his poetry was written.²¹ This

Leavisite legacy continues to inflect critical approaches to Thomas, even when an intention to break with this legacy is explicitly expressed. Thus, Neil Corcoran, who begins his discussion of Thomas by observing that the highlighting of the corporeal in his early poetry 'is overdue for a contemporary Bakhtinian reassessment', proceeds to ignore the cultural politics of Thomas's poetry in favour of a more emotive appeal to personal pathology. Within this critical/ideological framework, Thomas's highlighting of the fluidity of the signifying process and the materiality of language (discussed below) becomes simply evidence of an unhealthy youthful obsession, a 'glandular compulsiveness' and 'mesmerised and self-obsessed narcissism'.²² Thomas's relationship to poetic language is therefore seen as nothing more than a fetishistic substitution for (and thus refusal to let go of) the narcissistic plenitude of childhood or the pre-Oedipal – a reductive reading which effectively closes off any need for further analysis.

While Corcoran would no doubt find the comparison unflattering, it is precisely such crude psychoanalytic appeals to adult normalcy that sustain David Holbrook's three-volume attack on Thomas.²³ In order to display more fully the ideological perspectives that motivate Holbrook's critique, he is worth quoting at length:

Dylan Thomas sought to disguise from himself, as many of us do, suffering from greater or lesser neuroses[,] the nature of adult reality. Unconsciously he desired to return to the blissful state of suckling at the mother's breast. . . . Because of the nature of the world – our twentieth-century society – its immaturity, and its

reflection of his own neuroses, he was able to find acceptance and popularity *because* of his very immaturity. He invented a babble language which concealed the nature of reality from himself and his readers – and in its very oral sensationalism, in its very meaninglessness, it represented for him and his readers a satisfying return to infancy. This may or may not be linked with the man's alcoholism and his sexual promiscuity: but the baby-prattle has a tremendous disarming effect – the effect of involving all our weaknesses in a special plea for his. You don't smack a baby: and so every attitude to Dylan Thomas accepts the dangerous amorality of the engaging *enfant terrible*.²⁴

Again, perceived weaknesses in Thomas's poetry are characterised as simply the product of an arrested personal development, a failure to 'mature' and accept the socio-symbolic compact. It is noticeable, however, that the repulsion which Holbrook undoubtedly feels towards Thomas for this failure is itself imprinted with a barely repressed desire. As Holbrook admits, infancy, with its absence of responsibility, is in itself desirable, a state of being to which we all, to some extent, wish to return. Indeed, it is precisely the appeal of Thomas's poetry to 'our weaknesses', his seductive 'meaninglessness', that makes his poetry so 'dangerous', not only to the individual psyche but to the stability of the social order more generally. Thus Holbrook's avowedly psychoanalytic account not only masks a crude Leavisite conception of literature as the simple and unproblematical reflection of personality, but actively bolsters, as John Goodby and Chris Wigginton note, a 'profoundly reactionary politics': 'Thomas is served up . . . as

the product of a regressive and infantile modernity which he is simultaneously accused of helping to create'.²⁵

Significantly, the general poetic meaninglessness and childish inconsequentiality identified by Holbrook in Thomas's poetry are connected in further comments to perceived rhythmical and metrical inadequacies. To Holbrook, rhythm in poetry should be there to support meaning, contributing to the symbolic content that a particular poem is attempting to express. Thus, in Wordsworth's 'Sonnet Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', 'The rhythm . . . enacts the physical movement of surprise, joy, and the gazing-about at a panorama. *The poetry does what it says*' [original emphasis].²⁶ In Thomas's poems, by contrast, Holbrook sees the rhythm as a dissociating force, working *against* any symbolic meaning the poem might have to offer: it is the 'tumbling rhythm' of 'Poem in October', for example, which 'carries us past the demand for meaning'. Thomas's cardinal sin, then, is to divorce sound from sense, to privilege an infantile delight in the *sound* of words above a mature concern for their *meaning*. I will discuss below the cultural significance of such a 'fetishisation' of the signifier (as psychoanalytic criticism would term it), but for now all I want to stress is the extent to which this tendency in Thomas's poetic practice provokes some of Holbrook's most vituperative attacks: Thomas's poems, it is claimed, lack ' "inscape", organic rhythm, pattern, the true voice of poetry. And they are absent because there is no metaphorical discipline of art. It is all word-game, infantile babble, and as disarming as that.'²⁷ The array of hierarchical binaries which Holbrook lines up against Thomas in these three short sentences is formidable, the fundamental opposition of mature/immature repeatedly invoked by Holbrook being

bolstered by a whole host of implicit binarisms – natural/unnatural, depth/shallowness, order/disorder, truth/falsity, presence/absence, work/play, sense/nonsense – that work to associate and conflate immaturity with the second inferior term of each pairing. It is fair to say, however, that Holbrook is not alone in his marshalling of binary oppositions in this way; Russell Davies's denouncement of the oral/aural delights of Thomas's poetry – 'it is a shallow and sickly pleasure that uses the possibilities of sound to thrust back sense from its only appointed place, within words'²⁸ – invokes not only the opposition depth/shallowness, but draws upon the ideological resources of a further binary pairing, that of health/sickness.

The personal pathologising of Holbrook and others in their approach to Thomas's work should not be allowed, however, to obscure underlying cultural prejudices in their positioning of Thomas as immature. Davies's comment, for instance, is notable not only for its ignorance of Saussurean linguistics but for its failure to acknowledge the importance of verbal sound patterning to Welsh poetic traditions such as *cynganedd*, while Holbrook's derisive references to critics who have been 'hypnotized by Thomas's *hwyl*' and are content to accept his poems 'as bardic ejaculations' suggest their own cultural blind spots.²⁹ Indeed, it is important to recognise that personal attacks on Thomas's immaturity were embedded within, and partly enabled by, a metropolitan discourse which tended to view *all* Welsh literature as childish and inconsequential, not worthy of serious literary attention. So pervasive was this conception of Welsh literature that even George Orwell, a writer and critic with deep socialist convictions, could claim that Welsh literature in both languages was characterised by a 'tiresome affectation of childishness':

Nearly always [in Welsh fiction] the formula is the same: a pointless little sketch about fundamentally uninteresting people, written in short flat sentences and ending in a vague query. . . . There seems to be a sort of cult of pointlessness and indefiniteness, quite possibly covering, in many cases, a mere inability to construct a 'plot'.³⁰

As Jeni Williams makes clear, Orwell defines 'valuable writing' in terms of a set of prescriptive narrative conventions which reflect dominant constructions of maturity: 'Clearly defined, powerful and plot-driven, his favoured writing expresses the kind of "masculine" authority which rejects indeterminacy as childishness – or, implicitly, effeminacy.'³¹

Importantly, though, Williams does not dispute Orwell's conclusions *per se*, but argues rather that his identification of effeminacy and childishness in Welsh literature should be seen in the context of Wales's colonised and marginalised status. Citing Kincaid, Williams draws attention to the way in which the oppression of one subaltern group can never be divorced from the oppression of another, both drawing upon, and mutually reinforcing, the same discursive strategies and conceptual categories:

The 'romantic mythology' encrusting childhood is very much like that used for all racial and gender power-moves: children, 'coloureds', and women are all depicted as naturally carefree,

fortunate to be unsuited to the burdens of autonomy and decision-making, and better off protected by those in control.³²

Williams thus locates Kincaid's analysis of the child within the context of postcolonial and feminist debate, arguing that the attraction of the child and the 'childish' to Welsh writers is the product of Wales's colonial history. In particular, Williams suggests that the marginality of the child ('peripheral to the centres that control power and legislate meaning') is paralleled in the subordinate status (political, cultural and economic) of colonised countries. Reduced to a childlike dependency, the colonised subject, Williams concludes (and specifically the male subject), experiences his inferiority, his exclusion from an authoritative sense of self, 'in terms of infantilisation and emasculation' – an experience of selfhood that may provoke 'childish counterstrategies' of 'whimsicality' and 'exaggeration' that both endorse and challenge his subaltern status within dominant metropolitan/colonialist discourses.³³

Williams's analysis is a useful one, particularly in the way in which it broadens the terms of reference by which 'immaturity' can be understood in Dylan Thomas (or any other Anglo-Welsh writer). The 'childish counterstrategies' which Williams notes, for example, are descriptive not only of the 'whimsicality' and 'exaggeration' of Thomas's later childhood poems and stories, but might just as readily apply to the textual strategies of Thomas's early poetic practice, in which language's referential qualities are often lost in the reification of linguistic image (though this is an insight which Williams does not follow up). It could be suggested, however, that Williams's account relies a little too heavily upon a

colonial paradigm which tends to flatten out the historical specificity of the Welsh colonial experience and the way in which this impacted upon the construction of an Anglo-Welsh subjectivity. Indeed, to understand more fully Thomas's attraction to the 'immature', I believe it is necessary to supplement and complicate such a paradigm through an awareness of the specifically Welsh factors that shaped Thomas's poetics. The pervasive influence of Nonconformity, for instance, had a strong bearing upon Thomas's development as a poet, an ambivalent and often highly charged relationship with Nonconformist culture being as central to Thomas's work at times as it was to that of Caradoc Evans. As Goodby and Wigginton point out, Thomas, like Evans, often exploited the language of chapel and religion in a deeply subversive way, utilising Nonconformity's rich linguistic inheritance while condemning the social forms into which it had ossified.³⁴ While (as I suggested earlier) there are obvious differences between the cultural positioning of these two writers, the point is a valid one, and it is therefore tempting to see Thomas's identification with the figure of the child (and implicitly the feminine)³⁵ as part of his rejection of those values – sobriety, responsibility, respectability – which had become so cherished within mainstream Nonconformist culture. Interestingly, for example, Thomas often subverts religious images through their transformation from symbols of a stuffy, Nonconformist patriarchy into those of an idyllic, sensual childhood located within a wondrous and spiritualised natural world: as the speaker of 'Fern Hill' declares, 'the sabbath rang slowly / In the pebbles of the holy streams' [*CPDT*, 134].

While Thomas's response to Nonconformity differs considerably from that of Evans, it could be suggested that his displacement of officially sanctioned

religion by an idyllic childhood Eden is indicative of a greater freedom from the constraints of Welsh Nonconformist society. Such a freedom from constraint is also relevant to the issue of language, another cultural factor that potentially complicates any postcolonial paradigm. Tony Conran's point concerning the 'newness' of English to Anglo-Welsh writers (cited above) is of particular relevance here:

[I]n the Anglo-Welsh poetry of the inter-war period we are essentially dealing with a new language. English in the families of Vernon Watkins (1906-67), Glyn Jones, Dylan Thomas and Idris Davies was no more than a generation or two old. Before that, people no doubt spoke it, but it was a foreign speech to them. And this is true in spite of the fact that all four writers used English as their first language, and the two from Swansea spoke no Welsh at all.

To Conran, the significance of this newness is a freedom from social constraint, an ability to 'sound' words at their full power, unrestrained by centuries of accrued linguistic nuance. Of Idris Davies, for example, Conran remarks that 'one of our responses to his poetry is a feeling of shameless verbal nakedness. Words like *vision*, *truth*, *battle*, *wonder*, *passion*, are used without any of the restraint that English writers of comparable skill would employ.'³⁶ Such a lack of restraint is itself, it could be argued, a childlike quality, Conran's description of a language that is wondrously new, pure, and free from any socialising impulses, being strongly suggestive of a child's purported relationship to words. Furthermore,

Conran's analysis suggests that a colonial experience of selfhood as infantilisation was never, in the case of the Anglo-Welsh writer, an entirely negative one. If, for instance, the interstitial positioning of Anglo-Welsh writers worked to exclude them from cultural centres of power, this marginalised status was also balanced by a certain freedom from this power, an ability to deploy language outside the limiting conventions of discursive norms. Again, then, this dual positioning as subordinate to, but somehow beyond the reach of, power strongly parallels the ambivalent status of the child: subject to adult control on the one hand, while free from the constraints of adulthood on the other. Culturally positioned outside the constraints of symbolic convention, then, Thomas was provided, I believe, with a childlike capacity to enact in his poetry the most basic fears and desires of the bourgeois unconscious, and it is to this poetry that I wish now to turn.

'Before I knocked': Thomas's Early Poetic Practice

In a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson written during the April of 1934, Thomas lambasts the hypocritical posturings of Swansea's suburban bourgeoisie, '[t]he Sunday-walkers [who] have slunk out of the warrens in which they breed all the unholy week . . . and are now marching up the hill past my window'. Sneering down from the bedroom window of his Uplands home, Thomas continues:

Life passes the windows, and I hate it more minute by minute. I see
the rehearsed gestures, the correct smiles, the grey cells revolving
around nothing under the godly bowlers. I see the unborn children

struggling up the hill in their mothers, beating on the jailing slab of
the womb, little realising what a snugger prison they wish to leap
into. . . .³⁷

Of course, from a biographical perspective, it is easy to dismiss this description of Uplands' 'Sunday-walkers' as simply expressive of the young Dylan's feelings of frustration with the constraints of a provincial bourgeois respectability from which he was keen to escape.³⁸ Moreover, the air of smug superiority and detachment with which he makes his 'observations' seems all too clearly designed to impress.³⁹ Such biographical considerations should not, however, be allowed to distract from what is expressive of a more general dissatisfaction with the emptiness of social conventions, a dissatisfaction which hints towards a perception of symbolic expression itself as fundamentally inadequate. Manners and bodily gestures are, after all, themselves inscribed within symbolic systems, and Thomas's sense of their 'emptiness' constitutes an acerbic commentary on the way in which culture constructs our every act, investing each symbolic gesture with a meaning at once arbitrary and conventional. To Thomas, in a very modernist way, the social convention cementing the bond between signifier and signified is all too clearly revealed *as* convention, a convention which, far from guaranteeing access to an agreed 'real', traps us within an imprisoning simulacrum. Symbolic expression (and by implication identity itself) thus becomes nothing more than a series of 'empty', inauthentic gestures divorced from any meaningful context, a set of stifling social/symbolic codes to which even the physical confinement of 'the unborn children' seems preferable. Indeed, the stultifying quiescence of adult respectability is strikingly contrasted with the vigorous struggles of the children

‘beating on the jailing slab of the womb’ in their eagerness for life, a struggle which Thomas sees as condemned to betrayal by an adult world of hollow convention and dull respectability.

Turning to the poetry that Thomas was writing at this time,⁴⁰ it is tempting to see Thomas as mounting his own poetic resistance to the tyranny of the social compact. By privileging sound over sense in his early poetry, for instance, Thomas enacts in his own poetic practice a specifically non-adult relationship to language, destabilising the social contract between signifier and signified through a playful foregrounding of language’s materiality. Crucially, this materiality – what Maud Ellman terms ‘the written or acoustic tissues of the word’,⁴¹ its asemantic musicality – marks a return of the body into discourse, a return which implodes the conceptual categories that normally both protect and imprison us. As Thomas argues in another, slightly earlier letter to Hansford Johnson (from November 1933), our bodies are mapped out symbolically according to the arbitrary dictates of culture and social convention: there are no rational reasons, he suggests playfully, why ‘[i]t is polite to be seen at one’s dining table, and impolite to be seen in one’s lavatory’. What Johnson terms ‘ugly’ in his poetry, therefore, is merely the transgression of such bodily proprieties and conventions through ‘the strong stressing of the physical’. Such an emphasis, Thomas believes, is, however, essential if the abstract and the linguistically mediated are to be again experienced on the immediate and material level of the body:

All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action – however abstruse it may be –

can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses.⁴²

To Thomas then, the body provides a means of resisting the tyranny of social convention, of rupturing the walls of its imprisoning simulacrum and accessing, however provisionally, something of the unmediated plenitude which might be termed the 'real'.

These processes can be exemplified by a number of early poems in which Thomas 're-stages' the development of linguistic subjectivity from an initial state of undifferentiated awareness. 'From love's first fever' [*CPDT*, 21-2], for instance, from Thomas's first collection *18 Poems*, traces the process by which a child is interpellated by language, 'called into being' by 'the patch of words / Left by the dead'. What is emphasised in this early poetry is the constructedness of identity, its simultaneous emergence from a conjunction of organic process and cultural/linguistic inheritance. The initial division of the child's pre-linguistic unity is not, however, portrayed as a singular event, but rather as a continuous multiplicative process repeated *ad infinitum*:

One womb, one mind, spewed out the matter,
 One breast gave suck the fever's issue;
 From the divorcing sky I learnt the double,
 The two-framed globe that spun into a score;

A million minds gave suck to such a bud

As forks my eye . . .

While Thomas here stresses the organic and material bases of identity (associated with the mother), he emphasises equally a *paternal* inheritance, one that divides the poem's speaker from the dyadic unity of his pre-Oedipal identification with the maternal body: it is 'the divorcing sky', for instance, traditionally associated with the paternal (as opposed to the maternal earth), that teaches him to discern a world beyond the breast. However, this break with the mother is presented not as a singular traumatic event but as a continuous and on-going process of cultural acquisition. Indeed, subjectivity emerges through a kind of mitosis, a continual doubling and division that is both product and condition of the child's entry into the symbolic order. The lines 'A million minds gave suck to such a bud / As forks my eye' suggest something of the ambiguity of this process, the phrase 'forks my eye' recalling both the initial division between language and the maternal (the eye or 'I' being 'forked', that is divided, from its pre-linguistic plenitude), and the inherent division within symbolic identity itself (the 'I' being 'forked' or divided internally by its overdetermined status).

However, this entry into language is not simply represented as a 'fall' from some pre-linguistic plenitude with all the consequent feelings of loss that this would entail. Rather, there is a continual emphasis in the poem on the positive aspects of language, its creative, miraculous, life-affirming potential. It is significant, for instance, that the verb 'suck', mentioned first in terms of a strictly material nourishment ('One breast gave suck the fever's issue'), is repeated in a

cultural/linguistic context ('A million minds gave suck . . .'). Indeed, far from mourning his loss of the first stanza's undifferentiated awareness –

All world was one, one windy nothing,

[. . .]

And earth and sky were as one airy hill,

The sun and moon shed one white light

– the subject of the poem takes a God-like delight in constructing his world through its linguistic division:

The sun was red, the moon was grey,

The earth and sky were as two mountains meeting.

Language in the poem, then, is seen not so much as imprisoning the nascent self, but awakening it, and, moreover, as stimulating a profound joy through its construction of a relationship between that self and its surroundings:

And the four winds, that had long blown as one,

Shone in my ears the light of sound,

Called in my eyes the sound of light.

And yellow was the multiplying sand,

Each golden grain spat life into its fellow . . .

Division and multiplication, then, seem to evoke not a sense of loss but a deep delight. This seems partly to do with the construction, through language's endless proliferation, of an ever more wondrously complex and differentiated world; perhaps more important, however, is the way in which this world refuses to maintain any discrete, ordered identity. Indeed, the poem implies that it is within the *mixing* of categories and identities that delight in life is to be found: 'the light of sound', 'the sound of light', and 'the multiplying sand', each grain of which '[spits] life into its fellow'. The emphasis is thus on language's endlessly creative potential; if the subject is defined by a 'patch of words' which pre-dates his corporeal existence, he is nevertheless able '[t]o shade and knit anew' this 'patch'. Significantly also, the ceaseless flux of this 'patch of words' is in the grammatical term 'declension' related to the body's own mutability – 'And from the first declension of the flesh / I learnt man's tongue . . .' – the secondary meanings of the term – that is, to decline, deviate or turn aside – suggesting again a movement and mixing of categories and identities.

The subject of 'From love's first fever', then, celebrates its inability to achieve a stable, ordered identity, revelling in the endless creative possibilities afforded for reinvention by language's infinitely multiplying chain of signification. Moreover, by portraying the emergence of this self out of the flux of organic process ('One womb, one mind, spewed out the matter . . .'; 'from the first declension of the flesh / I learnt man's tongue . . .'), Thomas ruptures the static self-containment of the bourgeois body, undercutting the illusory identification of an autonomous 'I' with an autonomous body. Rather, the subject is presented as emerging through a series of interconnections (both corporeal and cultural),

positioned in the connective space where an innate bodily drive to speak confronts those words that have already been spoken:

And from the first declension of the flesh
 I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts
 Into the stony idiom of the brain,
 To shade and knit anew the patch of words
 Left by the dead . . .

To Holbrook, these lines suffer through their depiction of 'the shapes of thoughts' as being external to 'the stony idiom of the brain' rather than 'rooted in the "idiom of the brain" itself'; but this surely is the point.⁴³ Thought is never simply an organic process, reflecting unproblematically some essence of being, but is embedded within socio-symbolic structures which pre-date the subject. Language, therefore, is necessarily 'other' to the subject; an alterity which, to the speaker of 'From love's first fever', is reconciled through the reshaping of linguistic thought at the level of the body – that is, in the brain's 'stony idiom'. It is only by returning to the body, the speaker of the poem seems to be saying, that a fullness of being – one which bypasses the prescriptive demands of culture – can ever be achieved; language must be 'knit anew' (by force if necessary) in order to reflect its corporeal origins.

By implication, such a return to the body, with its refusal of language's socially agreed meanings, is also a return to infancy, a re-invoking of the child's pre-verbal delight in the aural patterning and asemantic materiality of sound: as

Stewart Crehan argues, Thomas's poetry is an 'outlet for the defiance of . . . social rules . . . an element of anarchic resistance springing from the child's initial pleasure [in the sound of words] is never far away'.⁴⁴ The radical implications of such 'pleasure', with its disruption of the socially cemented bond between signifier and signified, are illustrated nicely by another poem from *18 Poems*, 'Before I knocked' [*CPDT*, 11-12], a poem in which resistance to the social compact is traced back to the time of conception – to a time, that is, not only prior to the social 'facts' of gender and language but the formation of the body itself as a solid physical entity:

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,
 With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
 I who was shapeless as the water
 That shaped the Jordan near my home
 Was brother to Mnetha's daughter
 And sister to the fathering worm.

The subject of Thomas's poem is both shapeless and genderless, defined neither by physical distinctness, physiological attributes, nor the cultural taboos surrounding incest: he/she is both 'brother to Mnetha's daughter [a character from Blake's *Tiriël* who is attributed with kinship for all things] / And sister to the fathering worm'. Nevertheless, 'Before I knocked' presents a more negative view of subject formation than 'From love's first fever', the subject of 'Before I knocked' being forced to accept its incarceration within the flesh of the body ('As yet ungotten, I did suffer; / The rack of dreams my lily bones / Did twist into a living cipher') and,

as a consequence, confront the patriarchal/paternal authority which would 'kill' the undifferentiated sense of connectedness felt by the ungendered foetus:

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither
 A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost.
 And I was struck down by death's feather.

Indeed, the disembodied 'I' is displaced in the final lines of the poem by the capitalised archetype of patriarchy:

You who bow down at cross and altar,
 Remember me and pity Him
 Who took my flesh and bone for armour
 And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

Though these final lines are rich in ambiguity (particularly the verb 'doublecrossed' with its suggestion of motion as well as betrayal), it seems apparent that they mark the submission of the unborn 'I' to the Other of paternal authority, an Other which possesses the child's body ('Remember me and pity Him / Who took my flesh and bone for armour') and forces it to reject (or abject) its pre-Oedipal identification with the maternal.

Such a negative reading is belied, however, by the linguistic event of the poem itself, whose images work not only to undermine the natural inherence of patriarchal law but, in their irreducibility and resistance to paraphrase, stress the

materiality of the signifier and its autonomy from the signified, thus further subverting the social bond connecting the two. Thomas's response to the hollowness of symbolic convention and patriarchal law, then, is not to retreat from language but to engage with it ever more intensely, investing in the materiality of words in a way which aspires to transform them into *things* and so both make words *real* and make the real *speak*. This is true even of poems such as 'Especially when the October wind' [*CPDT*, 18-19] in which a recognisable 'real-world' referent continues to be evoked. I quote stanza two of the poem in its entirety:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
 On the horizon walking like the trees
 The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
 Of the star-gestured children in the park.
 Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
 Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
 Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
 Some let me make you of the water's speeches.

Language and substance become intertwined in this stanza ('[t]he wordy shapes of women', 'the vowelled beeches', 'the oaken voices'), so that the real world of things takes on the qualities of language, its ability to speak and construct meaning. In the process, the 'emptiness' of language as simple referent is itself 'filled' by its association (and even identification) with the reality of physical objects. The distinction between signifier and signified is thus problematised in the poem: while words become real, physical objects themselves signify in a way which, in Walford

Davies's words, 'is not divorcible from their simple physical presence' – what is termed in the next stanza a 'neural meaning'.⁴⁵ 'Especially when the October wind' therefore serves to fulfil Thomas's claim that 'When I experience anything, I experience it as a thing and a word at the same time, both equally amazing.'⁴⁶ To Thomas, words possess material significance: they do not (or cannot) simply 'stand in' for the objects which they symbolise, but must become (or, rather, aspire to become) those objects in their own right; objects able to speak the real by *being* the real.

However, as the image of imprisonment and alienation in the line 'Shut, too, in a tower of words' suggests, such an aspiration is also regarded as highly problematic by Thomas; an attitude again evidenced by the need in the poem *to request* that 'heartless words' be made real ('Some *let me make you . . .*'). Indeed, the poem as a whole seems ambiguously poised between a strident assertion of the possibility of making words 'real' and the ultimate futility of such an endeavour. This ambivalence is enshrined within the framing image of the heart and its blood, introduced in stanza one and reiterated, with change of emphasis, in the poem's concluding stanza (quoted below respectively):

My busy heart who shudders as she talks

Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.

The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry

Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.

Equated with blood, the vital force pumped by the heart in order to feed the living body, language, in a highly ambivalent image, is also depicted as the ‘drainer’ of this heart (which is also, of course, the metaphorical seat of life and emotional fullness), the verb ‘drain’ suggesting not only its emptying but its exhaustion – a point made more emphatic by the change in the final stanza from an active to a passive construction of the verb (‘The heart is drained . . .’). Depicted as the product and vehicle of life, then, language is also portrayed as the killer of this life, each ‘scurry / Of chemic blood’ – each pulse of life in other words – ‘draining’ the heart whose healthy existence is the very precondition of life.⁴⁷

Such an ambivalence towards language – in which a striving after linguistic presence seems equally to court a more profound absence – is a recurring theme in *18 Poems*, a collection whose poems return repeatedly to the issues of linguistic ‘emptiness’ and meaninglessness so prominent in Thomas’s ‘Sunday-walker’ letter to Hansford Johnson. However, whereas in this letter Thomas implies that the solution to such problems lies in the bypassing of restrictive social conventions, his early poetic attempts to circumvent these conventions through an investment in the body and the asemantic materiality of sound often appear to reproduce (or even intensify) the absences which they aspire to fill. This is most provocatively the case in ‘My hero bares his nerves’ [*CPDT*, 13-14], a poem in which the process of writing is presented as contiguous with masturbatory fantasy:

And these poor nerves so wired to the skull

Ache on the lovelorn paper

I hug to love with my unruly scrawl

That utters all love hunger

And tells the page the empty ill.

This conflation of writing and masturbation is perhaps not as outrageous as it might first appear. Like Thomas's poetic disruption of the social bonds cementing signifiers with signifieds, for instance, the fantasies of autoeroticism seek to bypass the constraints and prohibitions of social convention through a refusal to acknowledge the socio-symbolic value of the sexual act.⁴⁸ Indeed, in their characterising of Thomas as immature, hostile critics have themselves located masturbation and poetic meaninglessness within the same 'narcissistic' paradigm, moving with rapid felicity from discussions of poetic meaning (or its absence) to an alleged predilection for onanism (to Robert Graves, for instance, 'Thomas was nothing more really than a Welsh demagogic masturbator who failed to pay his bills').⁴⁹ Critics aside, what interests Thomas in this particular poem is the way in which both writing and masturbation promise a presence that can never be delivered, a promise that is ultimately only an affirmation of absence. As Goodby and Wigginton comment, drawing upon Derrida's concept of the linguistic supplement – the sign which ostensibly completes full presence but in fact marks its absence and ultimate unobtainability – 'Either form of self-authentication disrupts itself': 'Masturbation and writing both figure as an unnerving absence and a disquieting plenitude.' Thus, while the 'unruly scrawl' of ink/semen may 'utter all love hunger', what it actually 'tells the page' is 'the empty ill', the endless 'deferral of real voice or love as opposed to his [the speaker's] auto-affection'.⁵⁰

One other way of understanding this paradoxical conjunction of presence and absence is in terms of the abject itself – or, more precisely, the inherent ambivalence of the abject’s relationship to symbolic identity. Opposed to all systems of order and identity, the abject seems to constitute for Thomas both a plenitude beyond the constraints of socio-symbolic convention and a fearful place where identity itself – guaranteed by the social order – becomes an impossibility. Notably, for instance, many of the early poems which I have discussed in this chapter oscillate unstably between powerful affirmation and abject despair, the abject, as Kristeva argues, being always ‘edged with the sublime’ [*PH*, 11]. There is, however, an historical dimension to all this. Placed within the context of the 1847 Blue Books Report and its aftermath, for instance, what becomes most apparent about Thomas’s poetic investment in the body is the extent to which it is forced to negotiate a colonialist discourse that had consistently characterised the Welsh as bestial, degenerate and sexually profligate – in short, as irredeemably abject. Moreover, this poetic dilemma is echoed in the poet’s own personal life, Thomas’s rebellion against the respectable bourgeois world into which he had been born (dissected so brilliantly in his ‘Sunday-walker’ letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson) entailing the adoption of the very attributes – drunkenness, improvidence, profligacy – for which the 1847 Commissioners had so berated the Welsh and which, ever since, respectable Welsh society had sought so desperately to exclude and deny. Thus, far from accessing through an identification with the abject an anterior ‘real’ beyond the ‘rehearsed gestures’ of Swansea’s suburban ‘Sunday-walkers’, Thomas found himself after his move to London in 1934 centre stage in the different but complementary role of stage Welshman; a role scripted by his English metropolitan audience as long ago as 1847.

If the attractions of playing the improvident Celtic bard in London and America were always too great for Thomas to forsake, it is nevertheless tempting to see in the impasse of 'My hero bares his nerves' a poetic acknowledgement of the perils to which identification with the abject could lead. Indeed, in the poem's expression of an unbridgeable divide between 'all love hunger' and 'the empty ill' which writing/masturbation actually 'tells the page', it is perhaps possible to view 'My hero' as already prefiguring a later move towards greater referentiality – that is, to a greater acknowledgement of the socio-symbolic bond in Thomas's work. It is significant, for instance, not only that Thomas's abandonment of his early thematic concerns for a more referential mode of writing has been seen as evidence of his growing 'maturity', but that this greater referentiality has itself been explicitly equated by a number of critics with a movement away from the disruptive compulsions of the abject adolescent body. To Neil Corcoran, for instance, Thomas's later poems 'turn the mesmerised and self-obsessed narcissism of the earlier work outwards to a recognisable external world of action, event, suffering and relationship. . . . [T]hey diffuse the glandular compulsiveness into the compunctions of lament and love.'⁵¹ In a similar vein, Leslie Norris sees the movement in Thomas's prose from the surreal world of *The Map of Love* (1939) to the realist portrayal of inter-war Swansea in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) as proof that Thomas had (finally) grown up: 'He was probably ready to abandon the interior universe of his adolescent work and to create a world more like the one about him.'⁵²

Ironically, though, as Thomas jettisoned much of what might be regarded as the 'immature' elements of his writing, the child itself became increasingly important to his poetry, the focus of a nostalgic desire and identification in some of his most celebrated poems such as 'Fern Hill' and 'Poem in October'. This is perhaps not so surprising. As we have seen, the figure of the child was by Thomas's time already a convenient repository for all manner of unassimilable desires and prohibitions within bourgeois culture, a convenient Other against which a normative adult identity could be constructed. If the early poetry of *18 Poems* disrupted this opposition between adult self and childhood Other (not only by its loosening of the social bond connecting signifiers with their signifieds, but by its articulation of a troubled, 'immature', adolescent sexuality), then it is tempting to see Thomas's later childhood poems, in their depiction of a vanished childhood world free from the oppressive interdicts of the social order, as reaffirming, through displacement onto the child, a normative bourgeois model of identity. This may be a little harsh: the child for Thomas is never simply the convenient Other against which adult normalcy can be measured, but becomes rather, as the recipient and conduit of an unmediated bodily plenitude, a new site of resistance to the socialising impulses of linguistic convention – an exemplar, in short, for the adult poet himself. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which this new shift of emphasis in Thomas's poetry necessarily entails the adoption (at least partially) of a conventional bourgeois conception of the child (and thus of identity itself). It is no coincidence, for instance, that Thomas's move to a greater referentiality has been presented as evidence of a growing maturity, or that the destabilising grotesque images of the early poetry find little space in the later poems. Paradoxically, therefore, Thomas's reputation for immaturity rests not so

much on his later childhood poems (which in their acknowledgement of loss are seen, rather, as evidence of a growing *maturity*), but his earlier poetic identifications with the abject. Through such identification, partly enabled by his liminal cultural positioning, Thomas, I have argued, confounds the binarisms that normally order social discourse, and becomes himself abjected by those who, in their dismissal of his poetry as 'immature', would seek to negate the threat which this poetry poses to normative conceptions of selfhood and identity. The alleged immaturity of Thomas's writing should thus be seen not as a weakness, I believe, but a strength – a marker, perhaps, of his most radical contributions to English-language literature.

¹ Thomas, *Collected Letters*, p. 172.

² For a more reliable account of the visit, see Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, pp. 60-2.

³ Goodby and Wigginton, 'Dylan Thomas' modernism', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, p. 99.

⁴ See *ibid.*, *passim*, in which Thomas's hybridity is discussed within the context of a Gothic modernist practice resistant to the binary categories (particularly those characteristic of nationalism) through which cultural discourse is normally organised. Many of my ideas on Thomas are indebted to this article.

⁵ Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, pp. 51, 52. I discuss Conran's comments on the 'newness' of English in more detail below.

⁶ Quoted in Goodby and Wigginton, 'Dylan Thomas' modernism', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, p. 265. In the same review, Thomas continued: 'As a poem, *Vienna* leaves much to be desired; in the first place it leaves poetry to be desired.'

⁷ The role and significance of the grotesque in *The Valley, The City, The Village* is discussed at greater length in Chapter 6 below.

⁸ Tony Brown, Introduction to Glyn Jones, *The Collected Stories of Glyn Jones*, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. lvii.

⁹ Jones, *Collected Stories*, p. xxxiv.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. xvi, xxxix-xli, xlix-lv.

¹¹ Philippe Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* [1960], trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 33; quoted also in James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 61. To support Ariés's point Kincaid cites a number of other studies including: Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Richard Lewinsohn, *A History of Sexual Customs*, trans. Alexander Mayce (New York: Bell, 1958), p. 9; Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* [1957], revised ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967), p. 29; and Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 18.

¹² For the case against Ariés, see Linda Pollock, *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children Over Three Centuries* (Hanover, NH & London: University Press of New England, 1987), pp. 11-13.

¹³ Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, pp. 78, 79.

¹⁴ For constructions of paedophilia see *ibid.*, *passim*. Theories of sexual development which have characterised homosexuality as an immature refusal to acknowledge (sexual) difference are discussed in Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 249-75.

¹⁵ Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 78.

¹⁶ Jeni Williams, '“Oh, for our vanished youth”: Avoiding Adulthood in the Later Stories of Dylan Thomas', in John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, New Casebooks Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 172.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Leavisite criticism's impact on English literary studies (from the perspectives of feminism and gay studies respectively), see Aaron, *A Double Singleness*, pp. 10-12; and Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 68-70.

¹⁸ Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 217. Quoted in Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 69.

¹⁹ Denys Thompson, 'Our Debt to Lamb', in F. R. Leavis (ed.), *Determinations: Critical Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), pp. 201-17. Quoted in Aaron, *A Double Singleness*, p. 10.

²⁰ Jan B. Gordon, 'Decadent Spaces: Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de siècle*', in Ian Fletcher (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890's* (London: Arnold, 1979), p. 53; quoted in Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 69.

²¹ John Goodby and Chris Wigginton claim that 'over half the poems in the 1952 edition of the *Collected Poems*, or versions of them, had been written before Thomas was 20': Goodby and Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, pp. 4-5.

²² Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 43, 45. To John Goodby and Christopher Wigginton such 'glib phrase-making . . . betrays its own kind of narcissism, not to mention a certain kind of complacent "Englishness"' ('Dylan Thomas' modernism', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, p. 264).

²³ In David Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1962); *Dylan Thomas and Poetic Dissociation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964); and *Dylan Thomas: The Code of Night* (London: Athlone Press, 1972).

²⁴ Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited*, p. 128.

²⁵ Goodby and Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, p. 3.

²⁶ Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited*, p. 148.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁸ Russell Davies, 'Fibs of Vision', *Review* (Autumn-Winter, 1971-72), p. 69; quoted in Stuart Crehan, 'The Lips of Time', in Alan Bold (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* (London: Vision Press, 1990), p. 42.

²⁹ Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited*, pp. 108, 107.

³⁰ George Orwell, reviewing current fiction in the *New Statesman* (1940). Quoted in John Harris, 'A Long Low Sigh Across the Water: The First Translations of Kate Roberts', *Planet*, No. 87 (1991), p. 23, and Williams, 'Avoiding Adulthood', in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, pp. 172, 183.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 183. The closeness of such constructions of the immature to the perverse is noted by Kincaid in his discussion of Steven Marcus's analysis of Victorian pornography. Marcus, Kincaid comments, 'takes the openness of erotic fiction, its move toward endless development and its resistance to closure, as a weakness, indeed a sickness: "the author does not permit the counter-idea of genuine gratification, and of an end to pleasure, to develop"' (Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 171; Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 195). Marcus's speculation that pornography is more pervasive in societies in which phallic sexuality is in decline (p. 212) also implicitly equates immaturity with perversion, thereby contributing to a sexualisation of the child that is at odds with what is ostensibly intended.

³² Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 64; quoted in Williams, 'Avoiding Adulthood', in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, p. 172. Though Williams does not acknowledge it, what follows the colon (as well as the phrase 'romantic mythology') is Kincaid quoting from L. L. Constantine and Floyd M. Martinson (eds.), *Children and Sex: New Findings, New Perspectives* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981), p. 6. For the sake of clarity, I have reproduced the quote as it appears in Williams's essay.

³³ Williams, 'Avoiding Adulthood', in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, pp. 172, 174.

³⁴ Goodby and Wigginton, 'Dylan Thomas' modernism', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, p. 99.

³⁵ See Katie Gramich, 'Daughters of Darkness': Dylan Thomas and the Celebration of the Female', in *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, pp. 65-84. Kincaid notes similarities between constructions of femininity and constructions of the child, both being conventionally idealised in terms of innocence and purity (Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 14).

³⁶ Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, pp. 51, 52.

³⁷ Thomas, *Collected Letters*, pp. 110, 111.

³⁸ In a letter of January 1933 to Trevor Hughes, Thomas explains his refusal to accept a job on Swansea's local newspaper, the *South Wales Evening Post*: 'No, what I feared was the slow but sure stamping out of individuality, the gradual contentment with life as it was, so much per week, so much for this, for that' (Thomas, *Collected Letters*, p. 10). That this was in all probability a lie – Ferris suggests in a footnote that it was more likely Thomas's inability to master shorthand that lay behind his departure from the *Post* – only serves to emphasise Thomas's dissatisfaction 'with life as it was' and his continual (and some would say immature) need to fictionalise events in his life.

³⁹ Thomas met Johnson in February 1934 and they quickly became friends and later lovers. Johnson, who was soon to become a successful novelist, was two years older than Thomas. In his very first letter to her, however, Thomas lies about his age, claiming to be, like Johnson, twenty-one. See Thomas, *Collected Letters*, pp. 20, 22.

⁴⁰ Thomas's first collection, *18 Poems*, was published in December 1934 and followed two years later by *Twenty-five Poems*. Both collections drew almost exclusively (whether directly or reworked) on material which Thomas had copied into his 'Notebooks' between April 1930 and April 1934. See Dylan Thomas, *The Notebook Poems 1930-34*, ed. Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1989).

⁴¹ Maud Ellman, 'Eliot's Abjection', in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, p. 192.

⁴² Thomas, *Collected Letters*, pp. 39, 38, 39.

⁴³ Holbrook, *Llareggub Revisited*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ Crehan, 'The Lips of Time', in *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p. 22.

⁴⁶ Quoted by Alastair Reed in E. W. Tedlock (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet* (London: Heinemann, 1960), p. 54.

⁴⁷ It is interesting to compare Thomas's use of blood imagery in this poem with Kristeva's account of the symbolic significance of blood in Genesis: '[A] fascinating semantic crossroads, [blood is] the propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together' [*PH*, 96].

⁴⁸ For a recent account of masturbation in Western culture, see Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* [1982] (London: Paladin Collins, 1987), p. 373. Another comment by Graves – 'while Dylan Thomas might not actually have syphilis, *philosophically* he was riddled with it' (p. 372) – again indicates how Thomas's own writing of the body could provoke equally visceral responses from hostile critics, responses often utilising the same corporeal imagery that they condemned. Both remarks are quoted in Keith Selby, 'Hitting the Right Note: The Potency of Cheap Music', in *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art*, p. 92.

⁵⁰ Goodby and Wigginton, 'Dylan Thomas' modernism', in *Locations of Literary Modernism*, p. 103. For Derrida's own account of the supplement, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 154-5.

⁵¹ Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, p. 45.

⁵² Leslie Norris, Introduction to Dylan Thomas, *Collected Stories*, ed. Walford Davies [1983] (London: Everyman, 1993), p. xii.

5

**‘[W]hatever / I throw up now is still theirs’: Abjecting the
English in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas**

Discussing the relative merits of Wales’s leading twentieth-century English-language poets, Katie Gramich has the following to say about Dylan Thomas:

Dylan Thomas is a great Welsh poet but isn’t he also our burden,
our clichéd bard, the poetic equivalent of *How Green Was My
Valley*? He’s the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive whom we have to
lug around with us everywhere for everyone to recognise us,
pigeonhole us, and dismiss us. He’s the poetic shorthand: Welsh =
mercurial, passionate, drunken, bit of a windbag, obsessed with sex,
short, Celtic, demotic fag gummed to lower lip. Yes, that’s us.
Don’t we feel resentment and pride in him in about equal measure?¹

Although not without her tongue in cheek, Gramich here expresses sentiments which typify a broader mistrust about the authenticity of Thomas’s Welsh credentials among members of Wales’s literary and academic establishments. From Saunders Lewis’s outright rejection of Thomas’s claims to Welsh nationality (‘Mr. Dylan Thomas is obviously an equipped writer, but there is nothing hyphenated about him. He belongs to the English’)² to Gramich’s reservations about Thomas’s apparent collusion with English stereotyping, attempts to assess Thomas’s contribution to a distinctively Welsh literature in English almost

invariably feel obliged to engage in an identity politics in which the fundamental question of poetic ability cannot be easily disentangled from issues of national identity. Indeed, to Gramich, Thomas's flaunting of a 'stage Welshness' to a metropolitan audience in London and America is not only a censurable offence, but a reason in its own right why she cannot allow him to be acclaimed, despite his international repute, as Wales's greatest English-language bard. Furthermore, the question within which her response to Thomas is framed, 'Does he speak of and for Wales?', suggests that it is no coincidence that the poet for whom Gramich reserves the accolade of greatest Welsh poet in English, Dylan's namesake R. S., is one whose loyalties to Wales, and specifically a Welsh-speaking Wales, provide the departure point for much of his poetry. Indeed, the ideologically loaded terms with which Gramich juxtaposes the competing merits of the two Thomases – contrasting the authentic, mature voice of R. S. with the supposedly inauthentic, immature solipsism of Dylan – lend credence to Tony Bianchi's assertion that R. S. Thomas has been 'adopted' by a Welsh-speaking intelligentsia 'as its "honorary white"', 'a point of reference by which to distance or exclude other Anglo-Welsh writers of more dubious allegiance'.³

Certainly, the difficulties involved in locating Dylan Thomas within an identifiable national tradition are also those that bedevil any attempt to define the boundaries of a distinctively Welsh Anglophone literature. As Daniel Williams notes, not only has '[t]he very emergence of a significant body of Welsh writers in English in the twentieth century posed a challenge to any notions of national homogeneity', but 'a number of the key figures of that tradition – from Dylan Thomas and Margiad Evans to Dannie Abse and Duncan Bush – have, in their

emphasis on borders, liminal states and cultural interactions, produced writings that have proved consistently resistant to the cultural nationalist drive towards a singular Welsh literary canon'.⁴ One response by cultural nationalists to this proliferation of 'border' and 'borderline' figures has been to deny outright the claims of Anglo-Welsh literature to speak for any identifiably Welsh tradition or experience, the most notable proponent of this viewpoint being Saunders Lewis, a poet, dramatist, literary historian and critic regarded by many as the most influential figure in twentieth-century Welsh literature.⁵ To the question he posed in a lecture of 1938 (published in pamphlet form the following year), *'Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?'*, Lewis's answer was a resounding 'No', a refusal even to entertain the possibility of an English-language literature in Wales that could in any meaningful way be described as Welsh. Contrasting the two English-language literatures of Wales and Ireland, Lewis argued that the latter possessed four features not present in English-speaking Wales which gave it a degree of autonomy and national authenticity that Anglo-Welsh literature could never hope to achieve. These were, firstly, 'a separate world from the industrial civilisation of England'; second, a form of English which, for at least a century, had been 'the native speech of a traditional peasantry' and was now 'something rhythmically and emotionally and idiomatically separate from all the dialects of progressive and industrialised England'; third, a group of Anglophone writers 'not concerned with interpreting Ireland for English readers', but 'with interpreting Ireland to herself'; and, finally, a school of writers that was 'consciously and deliberately nationalist'. Lacking these markers of national distinction, Lewis concluded that '[t]he growth of Anglo-Welsh writing in recent years is the inevitable reflection of the undirected drifting

of Welsh national life. It will go on, becoming less and less incompletely English, unless there is a revival of the moral qualities of the Welsh people.’⁶

Lewis’s rejection of Anglo-Welsh literature, his insistence that it has no part to play in ‘Welsh national life’, is also, of course, an instance of *abjection*, an attempt to remove from inside to outside an Other whose very existence constitutes a challenge to the stability and integrity of a unified, homogeneous Welsh self. As Lewis’s effortless movement from a national to a moral discourse suggests (the reversal of anglicisation requiring ‘a revival of the [Welsh people’s] moral qualities’), Welsh-language culture constitutes for Lewis an ideal of purity which must be continually defended from enemies both within and without: industrialism, the English language, modernity in general.⁷ Indeed, to Lewis, the processes of anglicisation and industrialisation are coextensive, both aspects of a degrading and dehumanising modernity that is not only destroying Welsh culture, but any ‘culture’ that, as the morally, spiritually and linguistically ‘pure’ expression of an organic tradition and society, is, in Lewis’s terms, worthy of that name:

Whatever culture there has been in the mining valleys of South Wales has been the remnant of the social life of the countryside, and has been Welsh in speech. The extension of English has everywhere accompanied the decay of that culture, the loss of social traditions and of social unity and the debasement of spiritual values. It has produced no richness of idiom, no folksong, but has battered on the spread of journalese and the mechanised slang of the talkies. There is a Welsh accent on our English, – it is the mark of our foreignness,

– but there is no pure dialect. We very often admire a countryman who speaks his dialect with purity, and we are well aware of a standard of Welsh dialect. It is so also in the English countryside. But we don't even conceive of such a standard in the English of Wales.⁸

The emphasis placed on purity in this passage – a purity which slides wildly across linguistic, moral, and spiritual domains – is in itself symptomatic of why Lewis cannot acknowledge the existence of a genuinely Welsh Anglophone literature – or, rather, why he can only see this literature as part of a pervasive, morally corrupting process of anglicisation. Foregrounding the hybrid and the borderline, and, with its emphasis on the industrial experience, bearing the imprint of the modern, the very existence of Anglo-Welsh literature constitutes a disruption of the comforting binary (implicitly yearned for in the acknowledgement of an English as well as Welsh purity of dialect) between Welsh and English, Wales and England. With its dislocation and re-ordering of this binary structure, Wales's Anglophone literature poses a fundamental challenge to Lewis's essentialist conception of Wales and Welshness as the seamless social formation of an idealised *gwerin*. As such, Anglo-Welsh culture can only be understood as an undesirable aberration of an even more undesirable modernity; not even a culture as such, but its 'decay' and 'debasement' – two terms indicative, furthermore, of the textual strategies deployed by Lewis to abject the Anglo-Welsh from the 'purity' of Welsh nationhood. While the metaphorical import of 'decay' immediately suggests, for instance, that category of the abject which Kristeva terms bodily waste [*PH*, 3], the nexus of meanings contained within the term

‘debasement’ – most specifically, the term’s conflation of the ‘low’ with the adulterated – positions the pure/impure dichotomy invoked by Lewis within a supporting network of hierarchical binaries which together help to cement the distinction (established through abjection) between the purity of a ‘high’ Welsh-language culture on the one hand, and the adulterated, ‘low’ culture of the Anglo-Welsh on the other.

Lewis’s insistence that there was only one language, Welsh, that could truly speak for Wales – that was, in fact, not just the medium for but the very material of Wales’s national (and hence moral and spiritual) distinctiveness – was to prove highly influential in the post-war decades, an ideological touchstone for a Welsh-language intelligentsia keen to establish, as Tony Bianchi remarks, ‘that it and it alone could speak for the whole of Wales’.⁹ Within the critical writings of this intelligentsia, Bianchi claims, Anglo-Welsh literature was consistently portrayed in terms of its alien Englishness – as, that is, an unnatural presence that did not truly belong in Wales. Citing examples stretching from the 1950s to the 1970s, Bianchi shows how, in terms suggestive of lack, absence or artificiality, members of Wales’s Welsh-language intelligentsia characterised Anglo-Welsh literature as the product of ‘detribalisation’, labelled its claims to Welshness as ‘compensatory’ and ‘synthetic’, and dismissed its view of Wales as distorted by ‘the refracting window of a foreign language’ unable to apprehend the nation’s ‘soul’.¹⁰ Developing this analysis in the 1970s, the poet and critic Bobi Jones followed Lewis in choosing the abject body as the inevitable correlative of this perceived predicament: ‘Anglo-Welsh writing, in so far as it exists (and it does exist very forcibly), does so because it is a perversion of normality . . . a grunt or a cry or an odour rising from a

cultural wound of a special kind'. Characterised in terms of the deviant and the transgressive, Wales's English-language literature invokes from Jones the categories of the perverse, the animalistic ('a grunt or a cry'), and the bodily grotesque ('an odour rising from a . . . wound'), which together establish the unnaturalness and abnormality of Anglo-Welsh writing, its positioning outside of any normative national literary canon. Indeed, as Jones goes on to assert, Anglo-Welsh literature is no more than 'an enthrallingly interesting colonial project'; it is not, and cannot be, like literature in Welsh, 'a *complete* literature' [original emphasis], the use of italics serving to emphasise Jones's conception of Welsh-language culture (and the pre-colonial, pre-industrial past with which it is associated) as an autonomous, organic unity, the embodiment of Wales's natural and normative state of being.¹¹

However, while Jones undoubtedly shares with Lewis a perception of Anglo-Welsh culture as irredeemably abject, this common ground should not be allowed to mask fundamental distinctions between their respective positions, most notably the fact that, in stark contrast to Lewis, Anglo-Welsh writing not only exists for Jones, it does so 'forcibly' – with a power, moreover, that is a concomitant feature of its abject status. Where for Lewis, then, the depiction of Anglo-Welsh culture as abject provided a means whereby it could be dismissed in its entirety, as not even a 'culture' as such, Jones responds to Anglo-Welsh literature's metic, abject status more ambivalently, acknowledging the creative potential of such a status even while decrying the fact of its existence. Thus, while Anglo-Welsh literature is imaged by Jones in strongly pathological terms, as the diseased, abject product of colonial oppression, it is also implied that it is precisely

the rupture in the Welsh self produced by this oppression – what Jones terms its ‘cultural wound’ – that enables Anglo-Welsh literature to exist so ‘forcibly’ – with the disruptive power, perhaps, that a discourse produced at the margins of the self is always liable to possess. Furthermore, Jones suggests that, as the product of a cultural ‘predicament’ – namely the decline of the Welsh language in Wales – Anglo-Welsh literature’s continued survival as a distinct literary branch requires a greater awareness by its practitioners of the colonial process that has disinherited them – an awareness which amounts, in short, to an acknowledgement of the inherent *abjectness* of being Anglo-Welsh: ‘If it is to remain special, there is need of a realisation by Anglo-Welsh critics that their literature is not a geographical accident . . . but is the result of a violence, and has in itself still, however paradoxically, the character of that violence.’¹²

Perhaps surprisingly, many post-war Anglo-Welsh writers and critics have been more than ready to acknowledge this violence and subscribe to the view of their literature as the abject product of a violent colonial history. Indeed, the emergence in the 1960s of what Tony Conran has termed a ‘poetry of exile’¹³ was in itself indicative of the extent to which such attitudes had been incorporated within Anglo-Welsh literary culture. Conran’s own preface to *Triad* (a collection of poems by Meic Stephens, Harri Webb and Peter Gruffydd which appeared in 1963), with its characteristic depiction of the Anglo-Welsh condition as a form of exile, illustrates this point nicely:

These three poets are very different in their origins. . . . What they have in common is the experience of exile: not necessarily physical

exile, but exile from the inmost heart of their own country. All three of them speak English as their first language. All three of them have had to approach Wales, therefore, as strangers. And the degree to which they have returned varies with each. All three have returned to political nationalism as the only thing that offers them, and the generations that come after them, any hope whatever of avoiding the exile that has wounded them.¹⁴

Using the notion of exile to invoke the division (fundamental to the process of subject formation through abjection) between inner and outer, self and Other, Conran constructs a metaphorical topography of cultural belonging and exclusion, redeploying the associative content of exile – particularly its physical and geographical dimensions – within the sphere of language and cultural identity. Thus, while it is the three poets' exclusion from the Welsh-language tradition, rather than any physical separation from Wales, that Conran stresses, it is the geographical connotations of exile that continue to work in his imaging of the Anglo-Welsh condition as an 'exile from the inmost heart of [one's] own country'. This is an important point, for by figuring language as geography in this way, Conran is able to conceive of Wales as an entity that is at once both physical and cultural and from which, therefore, one can be physically excluded or exiled by virtue *of* one's culture ('All three of them speak English as their first language. All three of them have had to approach Wales, therefore, as strangers'). The experience of exile is thus inscribed within the subject itself, becoming, indeed, the defining feature of an Anglo-Welsh self that, as a species of non-identity, exists solely in terms of its relationship to Wales and Welsh-language culture. Thus, the

three poets are presented as somehow Other to their true (Welsh) selves, only able to 'approach' or 'return' to Wales (and hence their 'real' selves) through a commitment to political nationalism and the Welsh language – a commitment that offers the only hope of healing the 'wound' of non-identity that is the unhappy condition of being Anglo-Welsh. Of course, following Foucault, it might be suggested that it is the very nationalist discourse that offers to end the poets' exile that is responsible *for* their feelings of exile in the first place; that this 'hope' is nothing more than a ruse of power, a means of interpellating the Anglo-Welsh subject within the ideology of nationalism.¹⁵ Indeed, in the process of internalising this ideology, it could be argued that Conran himself becomes a tool of power, propagating through his own abjection of Anglo-Welsh culture the very consciousness of exile he is purporting to describe.¹⁶

While deriving many of its attitudes directly from Welsh-language culture, the 'poetry of exile' described and practised by Conran also possessed, in the figure of R. S. Thomas, its own Anglo-Welsh antecedent. As Conran remarks in *The Cost of Strangeness*, '[I]t was R. S. Thomas who anticipated the new poetry of exile, and indeed exemplified it. The model of which we [the young poets of the post-war era] were all most conscious was his alienation from his peasant parishioners and at the same time the historical Wales he identified with.'¹⁷ It is to an exploration of this alienation, and more specifically its significance for Thomas's imaging of Wales and Welshness through the 1960s and on into the '70s, that I wish now to turn.

‘[S]elf-given wounds / Wasted it’: R. S. Thomas and Wales

One of Thomas’s most vivid (and certainly personal) expressions of his alienation from ‘historical Wales’ occurs in ‘It Hurts Him to Think’ [*CPRS*, 262], a poem published initially in the provocatively entitled volume *What is a Welshman?* (1974). Portraying modern Welsh history as an invidious colonial process that begins with the Acts of Union (‘The decree went forth / to destroy the language’) and culminates in the ravages of the industrial revolution, ‘It Hurts Him to Think’ presents Thomas’s feelings of alienation from ‘historical Wales’ as a product of the colonial process that has culturally disinherited him. The virulent abjection of English-language culture which this alienation, rooted in a sense of historical injustice, provokes from Thomas, is exemplified perfectly by the lines of bitter, savage indignation which conclude the poem:

The
 industrialists came, burrowing
 in the corpse of a nation
 for its congealed blood. I was
 born into the squalor of
 their feeding and sucked their speech
 in with my mother’s
 infected milk, so that whatever
 I throw up now is still theirs.

Figuring the English language as an infectious disease, transmitted from mother to child in a parodic perversion of the essential nurturing act,¹⁸ Thomas presents the very process of writing in English as an act of abjection, a vomiting on to the page of the 'Anglo' alien within his (Anglo-) Welsh self. As with all forms of abjection, however, this is an inherently ambivalent process. Existing only through the terms of the alien English language 'sucked in' during infancy, Thomas (or his persona) is necessarily implicated in the very thing which he seeks to reject, this being, after all, no alien Other, but the linguistic fabric of his own subjectivity. The final assertion of the poem – 'whatever / I throw up now is still theirs' – is a pained recognition of this fact, an admission of the compromised nature of the Anglo-Welsh self: whatever Thomas 'throw[s] up' in his writing is not only Other ('theirs') but also *his* – what '*I* throw up'. Thus, in the same motion with which he seeks to expel the alien English Other, Thomas also abjects himself, throws himself up, acknowledges, in fact, that this abject Other *is* himself.

In seeking to understand the tortured processes of abjection in 'It Hurts Him to Think', it is important to acknowledge the debt that Thomas's nationalism owed to the cultural politics of Saunders Lewis.¹⁹ Indeed, if we are to believe the account provided in his Welsh-language autobiography *Neb* (1985), it was the vision of Wales espoused by Lewis that provided the catalyst for the development of Thomas's own nascent nationalism:

He read in *Y Faner* ['The Banner'] an article by Saunders Lewis that closed with the words 'O flodyn y dyffryn, deffro' ['O flower of the valley, awake']. It moved his whole being. He went to

Llanfarian [near Aberystwyth] to visit Saunders without a word of introduction. He was kindly received, and began to speak in English about his ideals and plans; but in no time he was led by Saunders to continue in his scrappy Welsh.²⁰

To M. Wynn Thomas, this meeting with Lewis represents not only a 'very personal tribute to Saunders Lewis's intellectual preeminence', but an acknowledgement by Thomas of 'the seniority and overlordship of Welsh-language culture'.²¹ Certainly, the passage itself (although admittedly a retrospective account) tends to support the view that Thomas's admiration for the elder writer emerged in part out of a sense of cultural inferiority and alienation, a keenly felt belief that to be Anglo-Welsh was not simply to be second best, but effectively excluded from Welsh cultural life altogether. Far from ending such feelings of exclusion, it is likely that Thomas's subscription to Lewis's brand of cultural nationalism only served to intensify this sense of being a cultural 'exile', particularly as Thomas continued (out of necessity) to write in what was for Lewis the language of cultural alienation, deracination, and a corrupting industrial modernity. Indeed, to write in English as a Welshman was, in Lewis's terms, a hopelessly impossible task tantamount to calling upon the abject to abject itself – a paradoxical act of self-negation that Thomas himself explores in a number of essays, most notably 'Hunanladdiad y Llenor' (1977; translated the following year as 'The Creative Writer's Suicide'). In this essay, Thomas argues that to write in English as a Welshman is a painful and inherently contradictory process, the very necessity of adopting the medium of English for creative work being symptomatic of the cultural loss and dislocation to which the Anglo-Welsh writer has been subjected. Forced to express himself in 'a

foreign language', this writer is 'neither one thing nor the other', but 'keeps going in a no-man's land between two cultures' – an analysis which is also, of course, a deeply personal lament, being the cause of Thomas's belief that, as the product of and contributor to English-language culture, he is automatically disqualified from the title of *Welsh* writer:

Woe that I was born! Who has suffered, if I have not suffered? For I bear in my body the marks of this conflict. Who in fact is this vaunted Anglo-Welshman – one who knows that he is Welsh, or likes to think of himself as such, but is constantly conscious of the fact that he speaks a foreign language? [*SPr*, 172]

Highlighting the contradictions (in his terms) of being an English-speaking Welshman, and drawing, like Conran and Jones before him, upon the abject body as the natural correlative of this cultural predicament, Thomas reinforces the notion of Anglo-Welshness as a wound, a borderline state of being – neither one thing nor the other – upon and across the boundaries of the Welsh body/self.²²

Thomas's acceptance of the Anglo-Welsh condition as a wound is crucial to an understanding of why, in common with a number of other post-war writers in English, he should regard Anglo-Welsh literature not as a literature in its own right, but as a means to an end, a way of accomplishing what is described in 'Some Contemporary Scottish Writing' (1946) as 'the re-cymrification of Wales' [*SPr*, 33]. This point is made explicit in the essay 'Llenyddiaeth Eingl-Gymreig' ['Anglo-Welsh Literature'] of 1952: 'My view is this: since there is in Wales a

mother-tongue that continues to flourish, a proper Welshman can only look on English as a means of rekindling interest in the Welsh-language culture, and of leading people back to the mother-tongue' [*SPr*, 53]. Somewhat paradoxically, Anglo-Welsh literature is only legitimised in this statement – that is, allowed to partake of a Welsh identity – through acquiescing in its own subordination to a Welsh-language culture imaged as the true and authentic expression of Wales's national identity, her 'mother-tongue'. Moreover, in constructing such a narrow definition of Anglo-Welshness, Thomas effectively excludes from the Anglo-Welsh canon those (such as Dylan Thomas) whose loyalties are of a more dubious quality. Indeed, while Dylan Thomas's writings, as Daniel Williams remarks, 'are particularly resistant to being read as national allegories and thus frustrate attempts at placing them within the safe confines of a national literary canon',²³ R. S. Thomas actively exhorts his fellow Anglo-Welsh writers to endeavour as 'true' Welshmen to place themselves within the confines of this canon. The paradox, however, is that these writers must also accept that their work will, of necessity, be outside this canon, or, at the very least, occupy a peripheral and subordinate position within it, as, in Thomas's terms, it is only the Welsh language that is able to express truly Wales's authentic national spirit.

The importance which Thomas attaches to the Welsh language as a path back to this 'true' Wales can be clearly seen in 'Welcome' [*CP*, 134], a poem collected initially in *The Bread of Truth* (1963):

You can come in.

You can come a long way;

We can't stop you.
You can come up the roads
Or by railway;
You can land from the air.
You can walk this country
From end to end;
But you won't be inside;
You must stop at the bar,
The old bar of speech.

We have learnt your own
Language, but don't
Let it take you in;
It's not what you mean,
It's what you pay with
Everywhere you go,
Pleased at the price
In shop windows.
There is no way there;
Past town and factory
You must travel back
To the cold bud of water
In the hard rock.

As with Conran's preface to *Triad*, the abstract realm of culture is inextricably intertwined in 'Welcome' with the physical realities of Welsh geography, Welsh-language culture being again figured as Wales itself – that is, as a geographical area that one is either inside or outside. Far from representing any physical reality, however, this Wales is an idealised cultural landscape from which all that is 'un-Welsh' – towns, industry, the English language – is rigorously excluded. By imaging the cultural in terms of the topographical in this way, Thomas is enabled in the poem's final lines to figure the acquisition of the Welsh language as a metaphorical journey into the inner purity of an essential Welsh landscape – one which lies beyond (or before) the contaminating commercialism and industrialism which mars the landscape of modern, anglicised Wales ('Past town and factory / You must travel back / To the cold bud of water / In the hard rock'). Significantly, though, the tropes of inner and outer which are used both to transform culture into landscape and imbue landscape with cultural significance, also work to separate the two categorical realms by distinguishing between their different orders of interiority. Thus, the visitor invited to 'come in' can only go so far: neither his money nor the ability of the Welsh to speak his language – as the poet punningly warns the visitor, 'We have learnt your own / Language, but don't / Let it take you in' – will allow him to pass 'the bar / . . . of speech'. Indeed, while there is a clear displacement of the cultural into the topographical in the poem, great care is taken never to conflate the two, Wales continuing to be defined in terms of a distinctive linguistic tradition. On the other hand, however, the binary opposition between inner and outer which dominates the poem allows this tradition to be imaged as a bounded space that is synonymous with Wales itself, the implication being that

those who do not speak the Welsh language can never be truly ‘inside’ Wales – are permanently excluded, in short, by virtue of the very language that they speak.²⁴

While it seems apparent that it is to non-Welsh-speakers that ‘Welcome’ is addressed, the exact nature of the poem’s intended audience is never satisfactorily clarified. In a letter to the *Listener*, Thomas himself has asserted that the poem is about ‘the English infiltration of Wales’ and is a direct expression of his own sentiments.²⁵ Certainly, with its invitation to ‘come in’, and its references to ‘your language’ and ‘the price / In shop windows’, ‘Welcome’ seems to be addressed to the English tourist or incomer. However, the poem can also be seen as functioning as an acerbic jibe at those in Wales – Welsh and English speakers alike – who are all too willing to provide a ‘welcome’ for English visitors. As such, ‘Welcome’ is, as M. Wynn Thomas remarks, ‘for home consumption, as much as for foreign, English consumption. It is indirectly addressed – addressed, that is, via the English – to the Welsh people whose national anthem, it sometimes seems, is “We’ll keep a welcome”’.²⁶ One could complicate this observation still further by noting that the overall message of ‘Welcome’ – that the Welsh language is the carrier of an essential Welsh identity from which those the far side of ‘[t]he old bar of speech’ are excluded – is as equally applicable to the Anglo-Welsh as to the English tourist. Again, the poem’s identification of the Welsh language with the purity of an essential Welsh landscape ‘[p]ast town and factory’ might also be seen as an indirect comment on the ‘un-Welshness’ of Wales’s industrial south.

If such allusions to the Anglo-Welsh in ‘Welcome’ can only be inferred indirectly, a tendency to conflate English and Anglo-Welsh is far more readily

perceivable in Thomas's prose. As Thomas elaborates his nationalist ideas in his essays, the distinction repeatedly made is between those who speak Welsh and those who do not: following Lewis's lead, Thomas often regards the Anglo-Welsh as little better than English. Indeed, as we have seen, Wales's English-language culture has, for Thomas, no value as a culture in its own right, but only as a conduit by which the prodigal English-speaking Welsh can be returned to the fold of *Cymreictod* [*SPr*, 53]. Furthermore, the 'un-Welshness' of the Anglophone tradition is emphasised to Thomas by its close association with the industrial areas of Wales. Like Saunders Lewis, Thomas locates his vision of a quintessentially Welsh people and landscape in the countryside, industry being regarded as an alien and unwelcome presence in Wales, an imposition on Wales's native values and culture from outside. Nowhere are these attitudes more evident than in the following passage from 'Anglo-Welsh Literature' in which Thomas regrets that so many English-language writers in Wales are products of the industrialised Valleys:

[T]oo many of them come from the industrial areas. They tend therefore to give an unbalanced picture of Wales, creating the impression that it is a land of coal-mines. But to me, the true Wales is still to be found in the country. The heavy industries came from outside and are something new: but the country tradition runs back across the centuries as something essentially Welsh, and every Welsh writer whatever his language, has a responsibility in this respect. He should work for the continuance of this tradition, for who knows but that the future will once more belong to small countries. [*SPr*, 53]

The irony of Thomas accusing anyone – let alone a writer from industrial south Wales – of presenting ‘an unbalanced picture of Wales’ is even more striking if the passage above is juxtaposed with the following description in *Neb* of Thomas’s post-war explorations of the Welsh countryside:

But besides Nanmor, which is one of the most beautiful areas of Wales, there were other places to be visited: Cwm Twrch in Montgomeryshire, for example, in the parish of Garthbeibio, where the river runs down in a series of waterfalls to meet the river Banw. Then there was Tal-y-llyn, and the sea itself at Aberdyfi, where they would go sometimes to take Gwydion [their son] for a taste of the waves. And by going around like this, he started to form a comprehensive picture of Wales, her mountains and moorlands, and her frothing streams.²⁷

Such a ‘picture of Wales’ is, of course, far from ‘comprehensive’, reducing Wales to an ‘essential’, unspoilt landscape which omits not only the industrial townships of south Wales, but any socio-historical context altogether.

These displacements of Welsh-language culture onto, or into, the Welsh landscape itself are suggestive of the failure of any real society – Welsh-speaking or otherwise – to live up to Thomas’s idealised vision of what Wales should be. Indeed, as M. Wynn Thomas has shown, by the 1960s Thomas was finding it ‘increasingly difficult to identify with any linguistic community’,²⁸ the continuing

erosion of the Welsh language – aided and abetted, as Thomas saw it, by the craven complicity of the Welsh themselves – placing him at odds with Welsh-speakers and the Anglo-Welsh alike. It is not just in the replacement of people with landscape, however, that Thomas's dismay at the state of Welsh society is registered; as in 'The Creative Writers' Suicide', this despair is also registered more directly via a discourse of the body – that is, in terms of bodily decay, mutilation and corruption. In these 1960s poems, however, it is Wales itself, not Thomas, that is either wounded, dead or dying, brought to its knees not only by English rule but – more shockingly for Thomas – by the indifference and self-serving ambitions of its own native inhabitants. 'A Country' [CP, 137], from *The Bread of Truth*, is a typical example of this period:

At fifty he was still trying to deceive
 Himself. He went out at night,
 Imagining the dark country
 Between the border and the coast
 Was still Wales; the old language
 Came to him on the wind's lips;
 There were intimations of farms
 Whose calendar was a green hill.

And yet under such skies the land
 Had no more right to its name
 Than a corpse had; self-given wounds
 Wasted it. It lay like a bone

Thrown aside and of no use

For anything except shame to gnaw.

This imaging of Wales as a corpse, fatally wounded by English and Welsh alike, is not an altogether new departure in Thomas's poetry: as early as 1952, for instance, in the poem 'Welsh Landscape' (collected in *An Acre of Land*), the Welsh are described, in strikingly abject terms, as 'an impotent people, / Sick with inbreeding, / Worrying the carcass of an old song' [CP, 37] – an image prefiguring the present poem's description of Wales as 'a bone / Thrown aside' for 'shame to gnaw'. Typically in both poems, Wales is portrayed as having been abandoned and left to die by its people, cast aside – as is observed with bitter wryness in 'Movement' (again from *The Bread of Truth*) – in the name of material prosperity and technological progress: 'Move with the times? / I've done that all right: / In a few years / Buried a nation' [CP, 141].

While in 'A Country' the landscape continues to tell Thomas that it is 'still Wales' ('the old language / Came to him on the wind's lips; / There were intimations of farms / Whose calendar was a green hill'), by the 1970s this landscape had itself been displaced by the wholly imaginary place of Abercuawg: 'a place of trees and fields and flowers and bright unpolluted streams, where the cuckoos continue to sing' [SPr, 158]. This further displacement is the product of an even greater strain of pessimism in Thomas's thinking in which, in a way rarely divorcible from the threat of Welsh cultural extinction, even the 'purity' of Wales's landscape is overwhelmed by decay and corruption. The poem 'Reservoirs' [CP, 194], from the 1968 volume *Not That He Brought Flowers*, provides a clear

illustration of Thomas's dismay at what he sees as the simultaneous destruction of the Welsh countryside and the culture which it sustains:

There are places in Wales I don't go:
Reservoirs that are the subconscious
Of a people, troubled far down
With gravestones, chapels, villages even;
The serenity of their expression
Revolts me, it is a pose
For strangers, a watercolour's appeal
To the mass, instead of the poem's
Harsher conditions. There are the hills,
Too; gardens gone under the scum
Of the forests; and the smashed faces
Of the farms with the stone trickle
Of their tears down the hills' side.

Where can I go, then, from the smell
Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead
Nation? I have walked the shore
For an hour and seen the English
Scavenging among the remains
Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language

Into the grave that we have dug for it.

While the Welsh are once again castigated in 'Reservoirs' for acquiescing in the destruction of their own culture, the landscape which, in poems such as 'Welcome', had retained the purity lost by its people is now itself tainted by the insidious corruption of anglicisation. In part, of course, this change in Thomas's relationship to the Welsh landscape is one that had been forced upon him by events such as the destruction in 1965 of Capel Celyn, the Welsh-speaking village drowned during the construction of Tryweryn reservoir. Indeed, to a large extent 'Reservoirs' is a direct response to this act of cultural vandalism. However, it is not just the destruction of Capel Celyn that Thomas laments, but that of the Welsh-speaking countryside as a whole. Drawing on an earlier poem, 'Afforestation' [*CP*, 130], in which he attacks the setting aside of vast swathes of Welsh countryside for the growing of forestry plantations ('It's a population of trees / Colonising the old / Haunts of men'), and on 'Rhydcymerau', the famous elegy for a lost way of life by David James Jones ('Gwenallt'), Thomas's lament for the destruction of the Welsh way of life moves from the drowned villages under the reservoirs to encompass the surrounding hills: 'gardens gone under the scum / Of the forests; and the smashed faces / Of the farms with the stone trickle / Of their tears down the hills' side.' The biblical connotations of the word 'gardens' is clear here, Wales being imaged as (formerly) a prelapsarian paradise, a landscape of innocent purity now invaded and irrevocably contaminated by 'the scum / Of the forests'. The Welsh landscape in 'Reservoirs' is thus no longer able to act for Thomas as an emblem of the essential purity of Welsh-language culture, the division between its 'inner' Welsh world and the Anglo culture which surrounds it – so important in 'Welcome' – having now

collapsed. Transformed into a corpse, Wales itself becomes an abject Other, what Kristeva would term 'a border that has encroached upon everything' [*PH*, 3]: 'Where can I go, then, from the smell / Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead / Nation?'

'Reservoirs' is a far subtler poem, however, than the lurid imagery of its concluding section might suggest. It is interesting to note, for instance, the apparent benignity of the reservoirs that Thomas so abhors, what he terms '[t]he serenity of their expression' – a serenity that belies the extent to which they are 'troubled far down'. As such, it is tempting to see the reservoirs as performing a double role in the poem, acting not only as a highly visible symbol of English colonialism, but as a metaphor for the Welsh people's complicit acceptance of that colonialism. Indeed, this latter interpretation is explicitly encouraged by their description in the poem's opening lines as 'the subconscious / Of a people', the change from the more usual 'unconscious' suggesting not only a watery pun, perhaps, but also, and more significantly, the almost total obliviousness of the Welsh people to the fact that they actually have been colonised. It is towards the Welsh themselves, then, as much as the reservoirs that symbolise their oppression, that Thomas directs his abhorrence, provocatively identifying, through the coding of both as abject, the former with the latter, the colonised with the very symbol of their colonisation: 'The serenity of their expression / Revolts me, it is a pose / For strangers, a watercolour's appeal / To the mass, instead of the poem's / Harsher conditions.'

Thomas's distinction between 'a watercolour's appeal / To the mass' and 'the poem's / Harsher conditions' also serves to draw attention to the positioning of Thomas's poetry in relation to the 'mass' abject culture that it so decries. While Thomas's contempt for popular culture is well-known, the distinction which 'Reservoirs' draws between the integrity of 'the poem's / Harsher conditions' and the abject culture of the (English-speaking) mass is suggestive of a more charged and mutually supportive relationship between the two – of a suggestion, perhaps, that it is upon its negating abject Other that the poem's integrity is somehow dependent. Two poems by Thomas to his cultural hero Saunders Lewis provide support for this notion. In the first, 'The Patriot' [*CP*, 150], Thomas describes, in lines that might be applied to his own poetry, the uncomfortable power of Lewis's writing, its ability to confront the Welsh with their own abjectness:

And when he wrote,
 Drawing the ink from his own veins'
 Blood and iron, the sentences
 Opened again the concealed wounds
 Of history in the comfortable flesh.

The 'comfortable flesh' with its 'concealed wounds' is clearly reminiscent of 'the serenity of . . . expression' described in 'Reservoirs', beneath which lies 'the smell / Of decay', 'the putrefying of a dead / Nation'. However, by actively invoking the abject and revealing history's 'concealed wounds', there is an implicit suggestion that Lewis simultaneously testifies to the integrity of his own body and verse, 'his own veins' / Blood and iron'; a suggestion that, in the later, eponymously titled

poem 'Saunders Lewis' [CP, 466], is made explicit: 'He kept his pen clean / By burying it in their fat / Flesh'. To M. Wynn Thomas, the portrait of Lewis provided by this poem 'can also be read as a revealing self-portrait of Thomas himself in his old age'.²⁹ While such a likeness can obviously be inferred, Thomas himself, I feel, would not have regarded his own pen as quite so unsullied. As his nationalist poems of the 1960s and early '70s illustrate, far from keeping his pen clean, Thomas's dissection of Wales's 'corpse' taints it with the very mass, English-language culture that he would reject – a dilemma best expressed by the concluding lines of 'It Hurts Him to Think': 'whatever / I throw up now is still theirs'.

¹ Katie Gramich, 'Welsh Greats of the Century: No. 1. Poets', *New Welsh Review*, No. 40 (Spring 1998), p. 12.

² Saunders Lewis, 'Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?' (Caerdydd: Urdd Graddedigion Prifysgol Cymru Cangen Caerdydd, 1939), p. 5.

³ Tony Bianchi, 'R.S. Thomas and His Readers', in Tony Curtis (ed.), *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Studies in Cultural and National Identity* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), pp. 84-5.

⁴ Daniel Williams, 'Beyond National Literature? Dylan Thomas and Amos Tutuola in "Igbo masquerade"', *New Welsh Review*, No. 60 (Summer 2003), p. 10.

⁵ For a useful introduction to Saunders Lewis's life and work, see Bruce Griffiths, *Saunders Lewis, Writers of Wales Series* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989). For a selection of Lewis's work in translation, see Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas (eds.), *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983).

⁶ Lewis, 'Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?', pp. 13, 7, 8, 14. For a lucid summary of Lewis's argument, see M. Wynn Thomas, 'Keeping His Pen Clean: R. S. Thomas and Wales', in William V. Davis (ed.), *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), p. 62.

⁷ For a study which examines the nationalism of Saunders Lewis and R. S. Thomas in the context of the anti-modern movement in Western culture, see Grahame Davies, *Sefyll yn y Bwlch; Cymru a'r mudiad gwrth-fodern: R. S. Thomas, Saunders Lewis, T. S. Eliot a Simone Weil* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1999). A summary in English of some of the main points of this text can be found in Grahame Davies, 'Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Vol. 7 (2001-02), pp. 50-77.

⁸ Lewis, 'Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?', p. 10.

⁹ Bianchi, 'R. S. Thomas and His Readers', in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, p. 73.

¹⁰ D. Tecwyn Lloyd, 'Cymru yn Saesneg', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1966), pp. 257-80; Waldo Williams, 'Anglo-Welsh and Welsh', *Dock Leaves*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (Winter 1953), p. 35; Aneirin Talfan Davies, 'A Question of Language', *Welsh Anvil* V (1953), pp. 20, 25. All quoted in Bianchi, 'R. S. Thomas and His Readers', in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, p. 74.

¹¹ Bobi Jones, 'Anglo-Welsh: More Definition', *Planet*, No. 16 (Feb/March 1973), pp. 12, 21.

¹² Ibid., pp. 12, 21.

¹³ Conan, *Cost of Strangeness*, p. 266.

¹⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, 302-3.

¹⁵ For a brief discussion of Foucault's conception of power, see Chapter 1 of the present study.

¹⁶ For an explicitly worded instance of the drive towards self-extinction inherent within the 'poetry of exile', see John Tripp's poem 'Irony': 'One day this dry / English pen, this arrogant / instrument, will no longer / be required. Then my short / modest task will be done' (John Tripp, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Ormond (Bridgend: Seren, 1989), p. 134).

¹⁷ Conran, *Cost of Strangeness*, pp. 266-7.

¹⁸ Thomas's gendering of English-language culture in the figure of his mother is worth commenting upon further. While there are clearly biographical reasons why he associates the two – Thomas's mother, says Justin Wintle, 'came from a background that was both self-consciously genteel and anglicized' (Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* [1996] (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 89) – the suggestion in the poem's corporeal imagery of a cultural contamination that emanates directly from the maternal/feminine body ('I . . . / sucked their speech / in with my mother's / infected milk') hints, I believe, towards more elemental fears of contamination by the feminine – fears that potentially prefigure the threat to an essential Welsh identity by anglicisation. For a study in Thomas's poetry of 'the female as constrainer of [male] freedom . . . [and] deceptive unbalancer of [male] identity' – as thoroughly abject, in short – see Tony Brown, '“Eve's Ruse”: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, Vol. 49, No. 195 (Autumn 2000), pp. 230, 229-50.

¹⁹ Thomas has been described as 'the true heir of Saunders' in John Roberts Williams, 'Gwir Etifedd Saunders', *Barn* (June 1992), p. 41, and as 'Saunders Lewis's [Anglo-] Welsh heir' [original square brackets] in M. Wynn Thomas, 'Keeping His Pen Clean', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, p. 77.

²⁰ R. S. Thomas, *Neb* (Caernarfon: Gwasg Gwynedd, 1985), pp. 44-5; trans. Wintle, *Furious Interiors*, p. 202. The original Welsh reads: 'Darllenodd yn Y Faner erthygl gan Saunders Lewis a orffennai gyda'r geiriau: "O flodyn y dyffryn, deffro". Fe'i cynhyrfwyd trwyddo. Aeth i Lanfarian i ymweld â Saunders heb air o gyflwyniad. Derbyniwyd ef yn garedig a dechreuodd sgysio yn Saesneg am ei ddelfrydau a'i gynlluniau, ond cyn pen dim fe'i harweiniwyd gan Saunders i ddal ymlaen yn ei Gymraeg bratiog.' Throughout *Neb*, Thomas describes the events of his own life in the third person.

²¹ M. Wynn Thomas, 'Keeping His Pen Clean', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, p. 63.

²² In a few very early essays, Thomas is more willing to accept the possibility of constructing a genuine Welsh literary tradition in English, comparing in 'Some Contemporary Scottish Writing' (1946) the post-war flowering of Welsh writing in English with the Welsh-language literary renaissance of the early twentieth century [*SPr*, 31]. For Thomas's rapidly changing attitudes towards Anglo-Welsh writers and writing, see Ned Thomas's discussion in his Introduction to this volume [*SPr*, 13-15].

²³ 'Beyond National Literature?', *New Welsh Review*, No. 60 (Summer 2003), p. 9.

²⁴ It is interesting that in *Neb* Thomas describes his decision to learn Welsh as a young curate in the border parish of Hanmer in north-east Wales as a means of returning to the 'true' Wales of hills and mountains which he could see to the west [trans. my own]: '[S]o homesick was he for the hills in the distance . . . he decided to learn Welsh as a way of being able to get back to the true Wales' ('[M]or hiraethus oedd o am y brynau yn y pellter . . . nes penderfynodd ddysgu Cymraeg, fel modd cael dod yn ôl i'r wir Gymru') (Thomas, *Neb*, 39-40). Once again, language and landscape, if not quite interchangeable, seem inextricably intertwined in Thomas's thinking.

²⁵ *Listener* (14 Nov., 1963), p. 797; quoted in M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), p. 125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Thomas, *Neb*, p. 50; trans. Wintle, *Furious Interiors*, p. 195. The original Welsh reads: 'Ond heblaw Nanmor, sy'n un o ardaloedd mwyaf hyfryd Cymru, yr oedd lleoedd eraill i ymweld â nhw: Cwm Twrch ym Maldwyn, er enghraifft, ym mhlwyf Garthbeibio, lle rhedai'r afon i lawr mewn cyfres o raeadrau i gyfarfod ag Afon Banw. Wedyn roedd Tal-y-llyn, a'r môr ei hun yn Aberdyfi lle byddent yn mynd â Gwydion weithiau i gael blas ar y tonnau. Ac wrth fynd o gwmpas fel hyn, dechreuodd ffurfio darlun cyfun o Gymru, ei mynyddoedd, ei rhostir a'i nentydd ewynnol.'

²⁸ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference*, pp. 124-5.

²⁹ Thomas, 'Keeping His Pen Clean', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, p. 77.

6

Writing the Abject in Two Welsh Novels in English: Glyn**Jones's *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village* and Niall****Griffiths's *Grits***

Towards the end of his autobiography *Neb*, R. S. Thomas makes this strange yet also revealing admission:

As his life reaches its end has R. S. any message, any advice to give? None. He hasn't experienced enough of human life to dare to preach to anyone. People tend to inhabit his imagination instead of being part of his personal experience.

Following this apparent self-criticism, Thomas backtracks considerably, however, not only defending his isolation from 'human life' on artistic grounds, but excusing it via an attack on the perceived failings of his fellow compatriots:

Because he wasn't a novelist, there was no need to follow people closely, in order to study them in detail so as to make them living characters in a book. His idea of people is that there are some who are good and some who are bad, with a large part neither good nor bad in the middle, whose lives everyday carry on in their uninteresting way. It grieves him that more English than Welsh people appreciate Wales's beauty. It is very disappointing that the

English on the whole are more knowledgeable about our country's birds and flowers than we are ourselves. They are also more ready to stand up for their language than the majority of our fellow Welshmen.¹

Leaving aside the issue of how Thomas knows that 'more English than Welsh people appreciate Wales's beauty', or the contentious assertion that the English 'stand up for their language' (do they not just take it for granted?), perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage is the way in which its strangely disjointed sentences move forward through a series of unspoken associative steps, so that what begins as an admission of personal failure ('He hasn't experienced enough of human life to enable him to preach to anyone') is transformed by the passage's end into an assertion of individual and artistic integrity – an integrity, moreover, which is inextricably intertwined with Thomas's position as a Welshman. In making this transition, Thomas deploys much the same distinctions – between the poetic and the prosaic, the individual and mass culture – which we have seen at play in a number of his poems. Asserting that, as a poet, he is free from the novelist's 'need to follow people closely', Thomas proceeds to argue that the lives of the majority of people are mostly 'uninteresting' anyway. On top of this, the Welsh people in particular are ignorant or uninterested in those things most precious to Thomas himself: the beauty of Wales's landscape, the variety of its flora and fauna, and its unique cultural heritage – themes to which Thomas returns repeatedly in his poetry and into which the social is (as here) consistently displaced. The implied 'message' seems to be that 'human life' in its actual conditions of existence is not a 'poetic' subject, but the terrain of the (inferior) novelist. Indeed, what is presented initially

in the passage as a weakness on Thomas's part – his lack of life experience, his distance from the 'real' world of everyday human existence – is subsequently revealed to be very much a positive, Thomas's reference to the novelistic art of studying people enabling him to link implicitly the natural beauty of the Welsh landscape with the (superior) realm of poetry. What occurs, in short, is an associative process of juxtaposition in which the Welsh landscape and language are imbued with the quality of the 'poetic' and defined against an opposite pole of associations (which might be termed the 'prosaic') relating to the human and the social.

Such a connection raises interesting questions concerning the role of genre in Thomas's construction of Welsh identity, particularly in view of the fact that Thomas often unites, through the trope of purity, his conception of the poetic with his idealised vision of a rural, Welsh-speaking Wales. One way of approaching such generic considerations is via the distinction that Mikhail Bakhtin makes between poetic and novelistic discourse in his essay 'Discourse in the Novel'. One of Bakhtin's primary concerns in this essay is with what he terms 'heteroglossia', the stratification of language 'not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word . . . but also . . . into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth' [*DN*, 271-2]. This social stratification of language, Bakhtin argues, is inevitably present within linguistic systems and enables linguistic change by continually undermining the 'centripetal forces' working towards a 'common unitary language' (as these in turn hold in check the decentring effects of heteroglossia). Each linguistic utterance is thus 'a contradiction-ridden, tension-

filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language' [*DN*, 272]. However, within this general linguistic rule, Bakhtin draws a fundamental distinction between the operation of poetic and novelistic discourse, asserting that while the latter works to highlight language's social stratification (heteroglossia), the former seeks to suppress linguistic diversity in order to affirm the individual integrity of the poet himself. In a way that partly echoes Thomas's own implied contrast, but from a perspective that clearly favours the generic form of the novel, Bakhtin thus distinguishes the two literary genres in terms of their differing relationships to the social (heteroglossic) demands of language:

[I]n the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality as reflected in his language and speech, which is directly realized in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. The novel, however, not only does not require these conditions but . . . even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose. [*DN*, 264]

For Bakhtin, then, the novel is an inherently hybrid or heteroglossic genre, foregrounding 'the context and contexts in which [each word] has lived its socially charged life', and highlighting the fact that '[language] is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others' [*DN*, 293, 294]. As such, the novel works to deconstruct the notion of any unitary meaning, its juxtaposition of competing and potentially contradictory discourses emphasising the dialogic

processes by which meaning is both constructed and contested. By contrast, Bakhtin argues, poetic discourse tends to suppress language's social contexts, subordinating the meanings of *others* to the individuality of the poet's unique and unifying vision: 'The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, "without quotation marks"), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention' [DN, 285].

As with all theoretical models, Bakhtin's characterisation of the poetic as an homogeneous and unifying discourse tends to deal in the abstract and the general, ignoring in the process the existence of poetic forms (such as dramatic poetry) that might potentially challenge the fundamental opposition in his thesis between the unified individuality of poetry and the heteroglossic 'other-tonguedness' of the novel. Indeed, as a model that is only strictly applicable to the individualised lyric of bourgeois poetics, it could be argued that Bakhtin's concept of the poetic is itself deeply rooted in the literary values and distinctions of the bourgeoisie, a class which has historically ascribed to 'good' poetry – and thus the 'poetic' itself – the attributes of individuality and integrity (a poet's 'true' voice) integral to Bakhtin's own definition of poetic discourse (in which, admittedly, the value of such attributes is consistently challenged). However, as Tony Conran's work on the Anglo-Welsh poet Idris Davies has shown, neither unity of style nor individuality of voice are necessary prerequisites of 'good' poetry. On the contrary, Conran argues, Davies's most successful poems foreground not the individuality of

his vision, but the social diversity of the many poetic 'voices' (religious, political, literary) available to him:

There is no such thing [as a typical Idris Davies style]. He has a very wide range of styles available to him: wider, indeed, than any other English-language poet I can think of since the sixteenth century. Such a spread of diverse styles is often a feature of a young poet learning his craft. In the case of Idris Davies, however, the more successful and mature his art, the more it is diversified. In his two long sequences, at any rate, and in *The Angry Summer* even more than in *Gwalia Deserta*, the whole strategy of the work consists in juxtaposition, style against style, viewpoint against viewpoint. He lacks almost entirely the power to build a sustained poetic edifice on the basis of a single, consistent style[.]²

Adopting a similar perspective, Dafydd Johnston also argues that Davies's poetic sequences are characterised by 'fragmentation' and a 'multiplicity of views and viewpoints', features which Johnston links to the rapid social disintegration and cultural and linguistic changes occurring in the south Wales valleys during the early twentieth century. Furthermore, Johnston identifies in this 'fragmentation' tensions and contradictions that echo what Bakhtin describes as the endless conflict in language between the decentring effects of heteroglossia, with its multiplicity of social voices, and the centripetal forces working towards a common unitary (and thus individual) language, Davies's poetry being at once 'an affirmation of his own individuality' and a means of 'identification with the community which he had

lost'.³ What I wish to stress here, though, is not the extent to which Davies's poetry exemplifies Bakhtinian heteroglossia (which it clearly does), but the way in which it undermines Bakhtin's distinction between poetic and novelistic discourses in terms of their different relationships to the heteroglossic demands of language. It is, after all, precisely the heteroglossic tensions foregrounded by Davies's poetry that Bakhtin regards poetic discourse, with its subordination of language's many voices to its own unique and unifying vision, as suppressing.

In fairness to Bakhtin, it should be stated that he is not unaware of potential discrepancies between the theoretical model of poetic discourse which he outlines and the realities of actual poetic practice. Indeed, in a footnote to his essay, Bakhtin stresses that what he terms the poetic is an ideal, 'the extreme to which poetic genres aspire'; in reality, he admits, 'numerous hybrids of various generic types exist . . . [and] are especially widespread in periods of shift in literary poetic languages' [*DN*, 287 fn.] – periods, that is, not unlike Davies's own. Leaving aside the odd attribution of agency to poetry itself (how exactly do poetic genres 'aspire' to the poetic ideal posited by Bakhtin?), such a qualifying statement leaves unanswered, though, the question of the applicability of Bakhtin's distinction between poetic and novelistic discourse to Welsh writing in English, particularly in view of the fact that many of the factors influencing Idris Davies's poetry (social and economic disintegration, widespread cultural and linguistic change) are also what gave rise to a distinctive Anglo-Welsh literature in the first place. Indeed, as R. S. Thomas's poem 'It Hurts Him to Think' [*CPRS*, 262] illustrates, Welsh writing in English, whether in poetry or prose, is often characterised by division and fracture, not unity and integration – a motif which clearly presents a challenge

to Bakhtin's conception of the poetic as an homogeneous and unified discourse. In this poem, Thomas concludes despairingly that, having been forced to think and write in a language not his own, he is therefore unable to possess or access an independent identity, free from the contaminating (abject) presence of the English Other; instead, he must define himself in a language that, paradoxically, negates the very possibility of achieving such self-definition: 'I was / born into the squalor of / their feeding and sucked their speech / in with my mother's / infected milk, so that whatever / I throw up now is still theirs'.

However, it would be rash to conclude from such a statement, with its rejection of an English-language culture with which it is also identified, that Thomas's poetry, like Davies's, is characterised by a multiplicity of voice. Indeed, there is an important distinction between Davies's foregrounding of the many social voices of heteroglossia and Thomas's assertion that 'whatever / I throw up now is still theirs': one that is not only symptomatic of the different ideological positions of the two poets (poetry for Davies being very much a *social* practice), but that also lends support to Bakhtin's conception of (bourgeois) poetic discourse, with its suppression and conquering of language's social heterogeneity, as the most extreme literary expression of an individualised identity. Despite the poem's claim to the contrary, the language of 'It Hurts Him to Think', for instance – its images, rhythms, and items of vocabulary – is clearly that of an individual poetic voice; Thomas does not, like Davies, dramatise a diversity of voices in his poem, but speaks only in his. Bakhtin's contention that it is the language of poetry, and not what it expresses, that establishes its unitary status, therefore appears in this case to be a relevant one:

Contradictions, conflicts and doubts remain in the object, in thought, in living experiences – in short, in the subject matter – but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted. . . .

Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks in his own language. [*DN*, 286, 287]

Enabled via poetic discourse to treat the English language as a corrupting abject presence or ‘alien thing’, Thomas both engages in the abjection of linguistic otherness, and initiates a process whereby poetry itself is identified with the perceived purity of Wales’s traditional rural landscape and culture. Thus, in ‘Reservoirs’ [*CPRS*, 194], the purity of an idealised Welsh nationhood is echoed by the linguistic purity and uncontaminated individuality of poetry itself, the image of the drowned Welsh valleys, with their ‘watercolour’s appeal / To the mass, instead of the poem’s / Harsher conditions’, being seen by Thomas in a way that implicitly identifies the ‘true’ Wales with the latter. Whatever doubts one might have concerning Bakhtin’s characterisation of the poetic, there can be no doubt, therefore, that, for Thomas at least, poetry – or, more precisely, a particular poetic form (the individualised lyric of the English bourgeois tradition) – provides a means of expression that Thomas can call his ‘own’, a language that, to a certain extent at least, has struggled free from what Bakhtin calls ‘the intentions of others’ [*DN*, 294] and is therefore able to serve Thomas’s abjection of mass, English-language culture the more effectively.

However, while Bakhtin's characterisation of the poetic is undoubtedly useful in the case of R. S. Thomas, helping to reveal the complex interconnections in his poetry between political content and aesthetic form, its theoretical paradigms are less clearly applicable to the work of Dylan Thomas, a poet whose typically modernist concern with the 'otherness' of language offers a potential challenge to any notion of the poetic as a unitary discourse. As has already been established, Dylan Thomas's privileging of sound over sense in his early poetry works to destabilise the social contract between signifier and signified, thus highlighting not only the arbitrary nature of symbolic convention, but also the asemantic materiality of language itself. In the process, moreover, and in direct contrast to the poetry of R. S., Dylan's poems actively embrace potentially abject material – one thinks, for instance, of the obsession with organic process in general and the more specific use of images relating to corpses and the maternal body. In the face of such an identification with the abject, Bakhtin's contention that poetry expresses 'the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality' [*DN*, 264] no doubt appears to be a fatuous one, but I would stress the importance of not rushing to such a conclusion straightaway. In its invocation of what Kristeva terms 'the semiotic', for instance – those 'pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate her/his surroundings'⁴ – Thomas's poetry might be seen as expressive of a different type of 'individuality', one that seeks to bypass the constraints of symbolic convention. Indeed, by retreating into the realm of the pre-social, semiotic language ruptures, through its aural and asemanticism, the mimetic identity ('I' only being like someone else) that symbolic convention has prescribed for the subject. As in Bakhtin's account of poetic discourse, therefore, semiotic

language is able to escape 'the intentions of others' [*DN*, 294] (in as far as such 'intentions' imply a particular position within the socio-symbolic order), evading the contradictions and incompatibilities of social heteroglossia through their transformation into the pure pleasures of sound.

In contrast, novelistic discourse highlights the social variety of language within itself, foregrounding the contradictions and incompatibilities between different discursive domains in a way that, significantly, echoes the mixing of bodies and bodily attributes regarded by Bakhtin as the defining hallmark of the grotesque. Indeed, although Bakhtin refrains from making any explicit connections between the two, it is clear that there are intimate links between his conception of heteroglossia and that of the grotesque. Typically, for instance, both are characterised by Bakhtin in terms of flows or processes that tend to subvert or disrupt the static linguistic or bodily ideals of 'official' bourgeois normality: both language and the body are, in Bakhtin's eyes, always in a state of 'becoming', 'never finished, never completed' [*RW*, 317]. For Bakhtin, nothing is ever definitively abjected or embraced; no individual is ever 'completed'. The connections between heteroglossia and the grotesque become clearer still if we remember, à la Dylan Thomas, that the body is itself a linguistic construct, imbued by different societies with differing socio-symbolic significance. It follows, therefore, that in the heteroglossic mix of the novel, normative, unitary conceptions of the body are likely to be problematised, the clash of incompatible discourses challenging the classical and bourgeois construction of the body as an 'individual, closed sphere' which 'speaks in its name alone' [*RW*, 321]. Indeed, as a hybrid and heteroglossic genre, the novel might be expected to embrace more readily that

which poetry would tend either to treat as abject or attempt to transform into its own unique language.

It is to the genre of the novel, therefore, where Bakhtin sees heterogeneity at its most extreme, that I will now turn in order to examine more closely possible connections between heteroglossia and the grotesque, and the way in which both relate to a sense of the abject. Of course, here also we can expect to discover texts that do not conform to the clear-cut divisions of Bakhtin's model: just as it is possible to find poetry that displays attributes of 'novelistic' discourse, so it should be possible to identify novels that are 'poetic' in character. However, it is not my intention to concern myself with such borderline cases, but rather to examine two texts, Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village* and Niall Griffiths's *Grits* (a tale of 1990s drug culture and social decay set in Aberystwyth), that engage directly with language's heteroglossic dimensions.⁵ By focussing on the portrayal of the characters of Trystan and Gwydion in Jones's novel, and Colm in Griffiths's, I hope to explore not only potential connections between heteroglossia and the grotesque, but also to suggest certain parallels between the different historical contexts from which both novels emerged. In particular, I will argue that the heteroglossic proliferation of language in south Wales during the early twentieth century, produced by the high levels of immigration into the region, anticipated in its effects more general developments in contemporary Western culture – in which, as Tony Brown points out, the clash of incompatible discourses has led modernist and postmodernist writers alike to be particularly open 'to the ways in which . . . the self, and the literary text, has to be constructed in a decentred society composed of shifting, unstable values and registers in which

none has ultimate authority'.⁶ The ambivalent feelings which such 'decentred' societies can produce – from liberated exhilaration to nihilistic terror – are nowhere more apparent, I will argue, than in their effects upon the imaging of the body.

Heteroglossia and the Grotesque in *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village*⁷

In Niall Griffiths's recent novel *Grits*, the Liverpool-born Colm comments upon the cultural and linguistic diversity of his family background as the product of, amongst others, an Irish father, Romany mother, and Welsh-speaking grandmother:

Some fuckin babel I grew up in, eh? Liverpool's like tha; even its version uv English ardlly sounds fuckin English. It's an Anglo-Celtic city, as much as Edinburgh is, or Cardiff, or Dublin. [*Gr*, 318]

Colm's use of the word 'babel' in relation to the heteroglossic variety of language which he encountered as a child hints immediately at an underlying ambivalence in his attitudes towards such linguistic diversity, suggesting as it does not only the potential for exciting new cultural possibilities, but, as the phonetic spelling stresses, also a sense of meaninglessness and general incomprehensibility: the Tower of Babel where language was 'confound[ed]'.⁸ Furthermore, and perhaps

most noticeably in the context of this study, Colm's assertion of a shared continuum of cultural experience between the melting pot of Merseyside and the largely Anglophone capitals of the 'Celtic' nations suggests significant points of comparison with the Anglo-Welsh situation, particularly the diverse, heteroglossic society portrayed by Glyn Jones in *The Valley, The City, The Village*. After all, as the following description of Pencwm grammar school's sixth form prefects indicates, the valleys of south Wales were settled, like Liverpool, by a culturally diverse immigrant population which adopted and transformed English into a vigorous new vernacular:

Islwyn Viner, the school swot and horseface, who for a birthday present had his text-books bound in leather; Carlos San Martin, our little Basque; Sammy Evans, cutter-off of window-straps, now regenerate; Evan Williams; Dicky Adler; fat, spectacled Aby Bernstein, who claimed his father's business had only two branches, one in Pencwm and the other in Jerusalem; and three or four other prefects. [*VCV*, 82]

Leaving aside the Jewish and Basque boys, it is noticeable how purely Welsh names (Evan Williams) are juxtaposed with pure English (Dicky Adler), and that both are conjoined in the hybrid Islwyn Viner. What is presented, in effect, is a snapshot of a new, culturally hybrid society in formation, a society that not only presents an alternative and more complex narrative of modern Wales and 'Welshness' than is to be found in the poetry of R. S. Thomas, but anticipates, in

many important respects, the kind of heteroglossic 'babel' that towards the end of the twentieth century produces the character of Colm.

Certainly, the complexities of language and linguistic use are a prominent theme in *The Valley*, *The City*, *The Village*, three of the most memorable characters of 'The Valley' section of the novel being invoked specifically in terms of their skill and ability to manipulate words. Firstly, Benja Bowen, 'who did things so he could describe them to you afterwards. He had the faculty of describing many things which he had not done also' [VCV, 32]. Then there is Anna Ninety-houses with her 'boiling deluge of English and Welsh', who rides 'the lawless torrents of reminiscence, intention, and parenthetical exposition' [VCV, 50]. Finally, there is Uncle Gomer, whose skill at story-telling impresses itself upon the young Trystan:

His narratives proliferated. He was incapable of recounting a simple, uncomplicated story which proceeded step by step from the beginning, through climax, to conclusion. Every person he mentioned in any particular narrative became himself the subject of a story, and before he returned to his central theme the people referred to in the digressions were also in turn described and explained and what was of interest in them was recounted. His talk rose like some magical and glittering tree expanding into the dimensions of a grove before one's eyes and heaving itself visibly bough by bough towards the heavens. But he never lost his way in the bewildering webwork of his narratives. [VCV, 59-60]

Such a description is, of course, also a description of Glyn Jones the writer and the wonder and delight that both he and his characters take in words. In the final sentence, however, there is a hint of a darker side to this delight in linguistic prolixity, a fear of losing oneself in 'the bewildering webwork' of signifiers and proliferating narratives. Indeed, the image of the 'magical and glittering tree . . . heaving itself . . . bough by bough towards the heavens' is also a reminder of that biblical symbol of linguistic confusion to which Colm alludes, the Tower of Babel: 'a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven'.⁹ Unlike the Babel Tower, however, which symbolises the failure of a unified language, its rupture into mutually unintelligible dialects, Uncle Gomer's 'magical and glittering tree' retains the ability to cohere and make sense of 'the bewildering webwork of his narratives'. Moreover, tower and tree are further distinguished by the metaphor of organic growth implicit in the image of the latter. While the biblical tower is an artificial structure, a man-made edifice that is both symbol and symptom of human presumption, Uncle Gomer's stories develop through the 'natural' processes of organic growth: they are the endlessly proliferating 'boughs' that grow organically from the stem of one 'trunk'. While suggesting initially division and fragmentation, the image of the tree is thus ultimately that of an organic and cohesive identity, one whose point of origin provides its own unifying principle.

Such a tree with its many 'boughs' or branches is also a reminder of the *cainc* of *The Mabinogion*, and the medieval tradition of fantastical story-telling which is one aspect of Glyn Jones's cultural inheritance. (It is notable, for instance, that one of the homesick dreams which Trystan has in Dinas [*VCV*, 135-39] also alludes to *The Mabinogion*, possessing strong parallels with *The Dream of*

Rhonabwy.)¹⁰ Another is symbolised by the picture of the ‘enormous oak’ hanging in Trystan’s grandmother’s house, whose ‘gnarled and heavily foliated branches’ are inset with the ‘bearded and venerable’ faces of the ministers of her chapel [VCV, 40]. This ‘gnarled’ tree contrasts markedly with both the *cainc* of *The Mabinogion* and Uncle Gomer’s ‘magical and glittering tree’, and is indicative of the way in which the ‘hybridisation’ of traditional discourses is celebrated within the novel – an early description of Trystan’s grandmother providing a case in point:

To me my granny was always a warm and visionary being. Sometimes, the whole sky ablaze, and the crimson sunball dissolving hot as rosin upon the hill-top, a tall black figure seemed to float out of that bonfire as though riding a raft of illumination. Her heavy progress was laborious, her shoulders rose and fell against the dazzling hump of hill-crest radiance with the rock of a scalebeam. She shepherded her rolling shadow down the slope; returning from the prayer-meeting she wore over her vast flesh her long black boat-cloak, with the brass buttons like a dramatic row of drawer-knobs down the front of her. [VCV, 12]

As M. Wynn Thomas remarks, ‘the dynamism of this portrait comes from its being, quite consciously, a culturally hybrid composition’, one in which ‘the biblical language of the grandmother’s own Nonconformist culture is taken up yet transformed by being embedded in what for her would have been a suspiciously foreign sophisticated discourse’.¹¹ Indeed, in its strangely defamiliarising amalgam

not just of the language of Nonconformity and Romantic modernism, but of the traditional Welsh praise poem (a number of which Jones had himself translated),¹² Trystan's description of his grandmother emphasises the new, exciting creative possibilities that a heteroglossic society, with its multiplication of potential cultural positionings, can afford.

Again, though, there is a darker side to this celebration of linguistic change and hybridity: the proliferation of discourses, while potentially liberating, can also lead to a destabilising sense of internal contradiction and incoherence. In 'The Valley' section of the novel, these more destructive tensions are most evident in the strong sense of guilt that Trystan feels for wanting to be an artist, a profession which appears 'to fall under the Mosaic ban' and is therefore seemingly irreconcilable with a Nonconformist way of life: '[H]ow was the dedication of an entire life to the vain pursuit of worldly fame, through the application of colours to paper or canvas, to be justified?' [*VCV*, 76]. In school, Trystan faces the opposite problem of explaining to his English headmaster ('a foreigner, and a member of an alien church') why it is that his grandmother regards painting as 'a frivolous occupation' [*VCV*, 85], and has to tread delicately between discourses as he explains why, despite the attractions of missionary work (his grandmother's favoured occupation), he would rather be an artist: '[I]f I were ever in some of those beautiful sunny countries I might be more interested in painting what I saw than in helping' [*VCV*, 86]. Clearly, Trystan (like Jones himself) possesses a deep-seated attraction to an aesthetic conception of art which sees itself as above and beyond the claims of the social. Simultaneously, though, it is precisely this disregard for society's needs and afflictions which Trystan regards as characteristic

of art (or at least the bourgeois, neo-Romantic model of art prescribed by his anglicised education) that undermines his belief in its value and imbues his desire to be an artist with the guilt of social and religious betrayal.

The sense of confusion felt by Trystan at this point – torn as he is between the different ideological perspectives of his grandmother and his own predilections – is intensified in the depiction in ‘The City’ section of the novel of a society in which the production of stable meanings and identities has broken down altogether. Attending university in Dinas (the Welsh word for ‘city’), Trystan encounters a society in which Uncle Gomer’s organic relationship with language (and consequently identity) no longer holds, but has been replaced by the inauthentic, ‘derivative’ selves of characters such as Alwyn, a fellow student whose multiple and contradictory personality Trystan finds deeply troubling: ‘I found it hard to accept the existence within one person of so much silliness, cleverness, and maturity’ [*VCV*, 123]. Indeed, Dinas as a whole is portrayed as ‘a place . . . where Wales loses touch with itself’,¹³ with its own sustaining narratives of identity; where language has ceased to represent anything outside itself, so that what passes for intellectual practice is the parrot-like repetition of alien discourses: ‘That phrase – obscurity and manifold ineptitude – he had read somewhere and was going to use in an English essay any day now’ [*VCV*, 122].¹⁴ Again, though, as is attested by the comic descriptions of the Calliper Club’s carnivalesque antics, Trystan’s relationship to this ‘inauthentic’ and ‘sham’ world is characterised by a strong degree of ambivalence:

But Legger's Mr Penmoel was, for Alwyn and me, the most rewarding presentation. Mr Penmoel, mincing, cultured, bald, and curly-sided, read aloud in class with one eye closed through a circular magnifying-glass part of a Middle English text, and presently, as his mellifluous recital proceeded, manifested symptoms of acute embarrassment, coughing slightly, stammering, scratching with the reading-glass the back of his neck, performing a sort of childish micturition dance, running his finger round the inside of his collar. Because with these posturings the learned philologist [sic] heralded the approach of a line of bawdry. Legger, standing there under the anointing light, was by some strange gift of hallucination even able to suggest the pudent port-wine blush that suffused his entire head and neck as the blunt Saxonisms were finally uttered and the steam of embarrassment which arose off the erudite cranium as off a cooking-pot. [*VCV*, 115]

The obvious verbal delight that Trystan takes in this portrait is evidence enough that he is as much attracted as repulsed by the Calliper Club's Bacchanalian revelry. What is perhaps most significant, though, is the way in which the ambivalence of his response to the Club is framed in terms of his equally problematical relationship to art: 'It was interesting and amusing, wonderful as a painter's spectacle, but I knew I would never want to go there again and I was glad of it' [*VCV*, 118]. Arguably, what troubles Trystan about art and Club alike is the perceived willingness of both to delight only in themselves, their ready abnegation

of the social responsibility that, for Trystan, provides the only genuine justification for art's existence.

Trystan's dilemmas concerning the relationship between art and society are paralleled by Glyn Jones's own problematical relationship to language and writing. One side of Jones – the self-professed fancier of words in his poem 'Merthyr'¹⁵ – was very much excited by the liberation of language into pure word-play: like the Welsh-speaking Zachy, Jones 'kept a little black book in which he collected big English words' [*VCV*, 105], and, as the above quotation illustrates, displays a penchant for archaisms and unusual items of vocabulary throughout his fictional work.¹⁶ The following description of Trystan's friend Gwydion is thus also, at least in part, a portrayal of Glyn Jones's own fascination with words and modernist techniques of writing:

He seemed sometimes as though mankind's ancient and universal faculty of speech were to him a new and enchanting discovery. He was a dictionary reader, a neologist, an inventor of nicknames, a collector of the technical tricks of the *cywyddwyr*. . . . He wrote poems by dropping water from a pipette on to words in his thesaurus, and by picking, as though from a bran-tub, phrases which he had cut out of a newspaper. [*VCV*, 269]

In contrast to Gwydion, however, Trystan (and implicitly Jones) possesses deep reservations about the wisdom of divorcing words and their meanings from their socially defining contexts. Enthralled as Trystan is by Gwydion's sophisticated

word-play, he ultimately rejects such sophistication as ‘shallow’ and worthless, refusing to endorse Gwydion’s claim that art exists only ‘to give us the thrill of non-recognition’ [*VCV*, 170]. Indeed, for Trystan it is only through the social efficacy of its functioning that language acquires ‘depth’: ‘As I go I think with resentment of the shallowness of his words, remembering the voices of Ystrad men who waited outside our door wearing black for my grandmother’s funeral, singing the simple Welsh hymn as she was brought slowly out of the house on to the pavement of Rosser’s Row’ [*VCV*, 269].

Such an opposition – between the ‘simplicity’ and ‘depth’ of a socially-engaged language on the one hand, and the ‘shallow’ sophistication of modernist word-play on the other – is problematised, though, by Trystan’s own minutely detailed descriptions of his childhood surroundings:

Sam the baker’s bread-cart passed very slowly and the front wheel went over a big shining gob that we had seen Harri Barachaws, the rag-and-bone man, spitting on the ground. [. . .] As the rim turned, a long thread of silver stretched up from the road in a bright elastic line, until the wheel moved too far and the shining wire of sputum snapped back on to the dust. By this time the rear wheel was passing over it and it did the same thing again, the glittering string stretched up from the road, fastened to the wheel, dithered with the increasing tension, snapped silently, and sprang back to its original position. [*VCV*, 8]

In their painstaking depiction of the minutiae of life, such passages can be seen as an attempt by Trystan (and Jones) to render into language every tiny aspect of a life perceived as wondrous and endlessly fascinating; like Trystan's 'paintings in minute detail of very small areas of landscape', they are 'life *en plein air* almost' [VCV, 148]. At the same time, however, the images used to convey this life have, as in Trystan's casual observation of 'a stepped-on slug with his bowels on his shoulder' [VCV, 25], an often jarringly defamiliarising effect. Far from simply conveying an anterior 'reality', therefore, Trystan's exhaustive descriptive capacity also emphasises the constructed nature of this reality, the ability of language to transform our perception of it and render it anew.

Significantly also, this ambivalent relationship to language tends to be registered in the form of the grotesque, a genre which transgresses and undermines taboos and moral boundaries in a similarly liberating and anxious manner, disrupting through its representation of the transgressive body the symbolic categories that stabilise meaning and value. The connections with heteroglossia are, of course, suggestive, the grotesque mirroring and intensifying in and across the domain of the body the jarring incongruities, tensions and incompatibilities characteristic of heteroglossic language. Again, both tend to possess an ambivalent charge in Jones's fiction: a delight in the endless mutability of language, and its ability to transgress the conventions of decorum and register which seek to govern it, is often precariously poised, threatening to collapse into the horrors of abjection. Trystan's unconventional description of his childhood friend Benja provides a case in point:

The sunlight was clear as a beam directed down upon his face, revealing every flaw and blemish, and my eye, like a high-powered microscope, travelled carefully over the absorbing territory of his shining and unshaved cuticle. In the intense illumination I noticed every dry scale of skin upon it; every blackhead, ink-blue or coal-black with age; every pustule in whatever development between incipience and maturity; every pole-like hair planted in its little hole. I laughed at the endearing comicality of his brassy lashes, his hat-fruit cheek-glaze, his protuberant Adam's apple, and his hulking head surmounted by the leather helmet. I bent over him, feeling helpless in a flood of affection and delight. [*VCV*, 31-2]

Despite the affirmatory final sentence, the wondrous 'flood of affection and delight' seems precariously poised in this description – in fact, it might be said that the threat of physical horror is only dispelled *by* this sentence. Indeed, as a comparison of this loving portrait with one of Gwydion's cruel caricatures reveals, it is purely an act of will on Trystan's part that distinguishes their very different outlooks on life:

'To what shall you be likened,' Dion said, when she had closed the door behind her, 'half cart-horse and half bird? Your beak to the hook of the duke-nosed condor or the rough-legged kite, your protrusive muzzle to some bladdery horse-mouth, you seem equine, runtish, and knacker-bound.' [*VCV*, 189]

While the nihilistic vision espoused by Gwydion ('the didymist who sees loveliness nowhere' [*VCV*, 302]) is proscribed by both Jones and Trystan, there is, as M. Wynn Thomas points out, 'a striking similarity between this cruel lampoon and Trystan's (implicitly endorsed) ways of looking at people as if his eye were "a high-powered microscope"'.¹⁷ Indeed, what arguably differentiates Trystan's own descriptive faculty from the decreative dissections of Gwydion's verbal portraits is only a willed ability to transform potential horror into a profound sense of wonder and even reverence. Nevertheless, as the similarity between the two verbal sketches suggests, such wonder is almost invariably shadowed by the abject horror which it averts: delight in the 'logopoeic dance'¹⁸ teeters on the brink of nihilistic abyss.

Confronting the Object: Niall Griffiths's *Grits*

There is thus within Glyn Jones's work a profound ambivalence towards what he once termed 'the despised and suspect gift of language'.¹⁹ If the heteroglossic proliferation of language can produce on the one hand an exciting expansion of creative possibilities and points of view, it can also result in a deep-seated ideological uncertainty and a foregrounding of the object – a duality that, as I have argued, is often registered in the form of the grotesque. Importantly, a similar ambivalence is also intrinsic to Colm's relationship with language in *Grits*:

A like werds, a always have; av hadder wey with em since a was a
kid. . . . A like the sounds, the rhythms, the ability uv werds ter

make the familiar unusual, an sometimes I can even taste them . . .
 burrit rerly means fuck all; my use uv language merely masks the
 fact tharrah doan have a fuckin clue, no fuckin idea uv wha any uv
 this is about. [*Gr*, 319-20]

As with Glyn Jones, Colm is obsessed with the materiality of language: its sounds, its rhythms, and even its 'taste[s]'. Moreover, neither character nor writer sees language as a transparent window through which reality is presented to us; rather, both see it as a means of defamiliarising that reality, of making the signifier as important as its signified. For both, however, this relationship between language and the unfamiliar is inherently problematic. For Colm, language is always 'other', a place where the 'familiar' is made 'unusual'; it is an exotic wordscape that delights but also alienates, promises yet ultimately refuses to reveal an underlying meaning behind its exteriority. While it is a similarly ambivalent relationship with language that troubles Glyn Jones, solace for Jones's characters is still to be found in the traditional narratives of religion and community (in his dream of the Day of Judgment at the end of the novel, Trystan's grandmother's final command is to 'learn and remember' [*VCV*, 314]) – narratives that, from the vantage point of the 1990s, offer little consolation to Colm. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the search for meaning is all the more frantic in *Grits*, horror in the face of the abject – registered once again in the form of the grotesque – the more acute.

Colm himself is well aware that meaning is always a matter of social convention; it is never just 'there':

–Yer can endow any fuckin phrase wither meanin that isn ther. . . .

All slugs wear hats on parsnips, ther y’go, ther’s one. Keep sayin
tha an sooner or later irril come ter mean summun. [*Gr*, 14]

Such an insight is as terrifying as it is liberating, for if meaning is purely a matter of social convention, then it is also, in a sense, arbitrary and ‘meaningless’. Indeed, throughout *Grits*, Colm’s response to a society in which no one discourse has ultimate authority oscillates between a disgust at life’s horror and meaninglessness (most notably in his discussion of Nazi atrocities), and an exhilarating libertarianism at the removal of all moral constraints. It is these two poles of feeling, for instance, that he playfully registers when discussing how a person would perceive themselves after being filmed having sexual intercourse with a sheep:

Therd be two choices, it seems, two reactions, either summun like: I am the pits, the fuckin dregs uv humanity, the lowest ov the fuckin low cos I av let meself be filmed avin sex wither sheep; or summun like: I av done the werst thing I can possibly think ov, I av let meself be filmed shaggin a sheep, I cannot sink any ferther, therefore I am freed now from all moral conventions an I am liberated. I can now do wharrever the fuck a want. [*Gr*, 11]

Paralleling the horror of abjection is a powerful ego-mania, a feeling of having replaced the God that has been declared dead. Undoubtedly, one side of Colm revels in the endless possibilities of self-construction that contemporary society

affords – indeed, his identity is itself a multiple, plural ‘performance’. As Malcolm comments, Colm talks ‘as if ee’s paradin abaht on a stage. . . . [I]n is mind like Colm’s always bin famous; ya can tell. In is mind, ee moves abaht in a spotlight’ [Gr, 442].

As his brooding thoughts on death attest, such freedom from morality possesses a darker side, however: Colm is as much terrified as elated by the dismantling of meaning in Western society – a fear that is often registered in the form of the grotesque. Following his discovery of a woman’s corpse in Aberystwyth harbour, Colm is seized by a nihilistic despair, rendered abject by the sight of human mortality:

[N]othin ever prepares yer fer this horror, nothin can ever help yer ter build up thee emotional defences yer need ter deal with the shite an terror inherent in this life, this werld, cos the shite an the terror ar too fuckin big, too huge and horrendous too shitey and too terrible ter ever be fuckin coped with, they’ll eat you in one gulp and shit yer out bfore yuv ad time ter shed yer ferst fuckin tear. Ther’s nothin yer can do. NOTHING. An if ther’s nowt after death then why be afraid uv it? That makes sense, dunnit? But the thought uv tha nothingness, tha void, tha vacuum, adds horror and trembling an meaninglessness to the something tha precedes it, the life . . .

[Gr, 326]

As Kristeva argues, ‘The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the

utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' [*PH*, 4].²⁰ Without the protection of belief in a consolatory afterlife, Colm finds himself unable to withdraw from death's implacable presence; indeed, as he imagines himself being swallowed and excreted by 'the shite an the terror', he is unable to prevent himself from identifying with the abject horror in front of him. This identification is extended in the final section of the passage to life itself, upon which the shadow of an annihilating death encroaches remorselessly: 'But the thought uv tha nothingness, tha void, tha vacuum, adds horror and trembling an meaninglessness to the something tha precedes it, the life . . .'

In common with many of Griffiths's characters, Colm's sense of the abject thus stems from a yearning for some form of metaphysical belief in a world where such belief is no longer possible – for a narrative, that is, able to organise, order, and provide meaning to his existence.²¹ In the absence of such a narrative, Colm attempts to construct his own: like Trystan's Uncle Gomer, he is an inveterate story-teller and compiler of tales. However, while Uncle Gomer's tales possess a unifying and cohesive principle, Colm's skill at story-telling, as Malcolm points out, is symptomatic of an underlying confusion and bewilderment: 'Colm, undaneaf it awl, is just as confused an bewildered as tha rest of us, maybe maw so; that's why ee's sow addicted ta tellin stawries, cos they seem somehow ta give im some focus, aw meaning, aw goal' [*Gr*, 443]. Certainly, language for Colm is more than a means of communication; it is also, like heroin, a way of filling 'the void, the banality, the unbearable emptiness of evreydey life' [*Gr*, 273]. Thus, lost in the '[a]mazin fuckin werds' of Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree*, Colm describes himself as having, for once, '[n]o craving, no hunger, no need, just safe an warm

an comfortable' [Gr, 282]. Similarly, it is through its transformation into narrative that the harrowing experience of discovering a fox in a snare is made bearable: '[A]t least av gorror good story ter tell, ey? Yeh, at least ther's that. A feel orright now' [Gr, 299]. Even his own life is self-consciously reviewed in terms of an essay, concluding with a parody of an examiner's dry remarks:

This is a disappointing, carelessly written piece of work, bereft of narrative thrust and with little in the way of descriptive drive or interest. The main protagonist is unattractive, indeed repellent; the reader must be able to empathise, or at least sympathise, if a writer is to make an impression. 2/ 10. Could, must, do better. [Gr, 276]

However, such a parody also suggests an awareness on Colm's part of the frailty of his fictions: the weakness of their hold over life, their inability to fill 'the void'. Language for Colm is never an adequate substitute for life anyway, and he violently rejects Liam's assertion 'tha ee only lirms about life t'rew bukes' [Gr, 360]. Indeed, in his pursuit of meaning Colm is led inexorably into a confrontation with the unassimilable and the abject, that which lies beyond the compass of linguistic representation (a process which Malcolm drily terms 'not . . . knowin when ta stop' [Gr, 466]). However, in opening himself up to the abject, Colm's grip on the symbolic becomes increasingly weaker; his ability to distinguish between language and reality starts to vanish. As Malcolm again notes: 'A down't fink ee knows imself any maw what's true or not, what really happened. A down't fink tha distinction between fantasy an reality exists fa Colm any maw' [Gr, 450].

Colm's inability to find an explanation or narrative that will sustain stable meaning possesses certain similarities with the character of Gwydion in *The Valley, The City, The Village*. Both characters are strongly aware, for instance, of the physical chaos and squalor which lie outside, and continually threaten to overwhelm, any discursive attempt to impose order, morality, and civilisation: what Colm terms 'those futile attempts at a small amelioration of a life whose savagery will brook no compromise nor knows no mercy' [*Gr*, 297]. However, the response of each to this 'savage' reality is very much of its time. In marked contrast to Colm's opening up of language to the abject, for instance, Gwydion attempts to cope with the sordidness of reality by fetishising, in typically modernist fashion, an aesthetic literary ideal – a poetic language outside of 'life, belief, and dogma':

Life, Dion maintained, was a protracted humiliation and indignity for mankind, it was ridiculous always, and ugly, brutal, and corrupt in addition; our bodies and our desires were shameful, and poverty, loneliness, disease, torture, starvation, and death were the lot of the swarming generations. But literature is concerned with language, images, and words; it is shapely, formal; the little supreme literature extant, the three or four hundred lines of verse in any language which are real poetry, are perfection; they are immaculate and immortal. [*VCV*, 243]

Gwydion's response to life's horrors is to refuse to take its risks, to retreat from it into a literature totally divorced from, and opposed to, its origins in that life.

Unable to enter into a productive relationship with the squalid, the grotesque, and the chaotic – ‘the swarming generations’ of life in all its messy physicality – Gwydion constructs his own ‘formal’ and ‘shapely’ reality from the material of a completely self-referential language, ‘materialising’ the signifier in order to suspend its referential and temporal functions. Death is thus overcome by negating life in a Yeatsian ‘supreme art which . . . win[s] us from life and gather[s] us into eternity’:²² that is, a literature which is ‘immaculate and immortal’. Indeed, Gwydion’s conception of a poem as a closed, integrated whole – which, in Dylan Thomas’s words, ‘moves only towards its own end . . . the last line’²³ – is very much in keeping with a certain modernist notion of art – an art that, in Stephen Connor’s words, ‘will know no other rules but its own, and will transform the vulgar contingency of worldly relations into purified aesthetic terms’.²⁴ Aesthetic form in such art (which is generally poetic in literature) is thus predicated upon underlying feelings of disgust and revulsion which the form itself transforms and purifies.

The language of Colm, by contrast, is continually open to the chaos and transgression of the grotesque body. Indeed, Colm is obsessed with scatological description, and revels in hyberbolic accounts of excretion and the excretory process:

–Ther’s somethin absurdly satisfyin about sittin on the bog ridin the
ripe, risin reek of yer own hot, dropped fodder an then standin ter
peer down at a statically seethin knot of beige vipers. [*Gr*, 442]

In contrast to Gwydion, the palpable nature of language, its sounds and rhythms, are used by Colm to evoke rather than deny evidence of the body and its functions: the mass of the stool, for example, in the heavy repeated vowel sounds of ‘hot, dropped fodder’, and the hissing of the ‘beige vipers’ in the alliterative ‘esses’ of ‘statically seething’. Nevertheless, however different in form from Gwydion’s poetic credos, there is still a sense in which Colm seeks to create ordered and consolatory art from underlying feelings of disgust, extending the boundaries of language’s representational capacity as he does so.²⁵ Inevitably, however, the grotesque exceeds the medium of its representation, Colm’s aestheticising of the body and bodily processes never being far away from the threat of physical horror and revulsion:

The end uv me knob, hangin down ther like bitween me legs,
 presses cold on the pissy porcelain an a think uv all the different
 dicks tharrav touched exactly tha spot an me belly rolls over agen.
 Jesus. The things yer avter do . . . all the little daily abominations
 . . . [*Gr*, 317]

Colm’s revulsion springs from his sudden awareness of the fragility and permeability of his corporeal boundaries – a revelation that calls into question the integrity of his masculine self. Significantly, for instance, his disgust occurs at the precise moment that his penis, the defining physical attribute of his masculinity, is brought into imaginary contact with the penises of others. The fear of contamination expressed by the passage is thus not merely one of physical horror; it also speaks directly to the threat the abject poses to Colm’s sense of heterosexual

individuality and autonomy.

This latter point can be exemplified via Colm's encounter with Oxford John, a Nazi apologist who is himself described in terms of contamination: '[a] cunt . . . [who] taint[s] things with is diseased ideas' [*Gr*, 334]. In order to shock and disrupt the 'armour' of John's neo-Nazi beliefs, Colm relates 'a story about followin through' [*Gr*, 334], deliberately foregrounding the chaotic, abject body in an attempt to get John's totalitarian mind to accept his heterogeneous physicality:

–Ah, Christ, it wuz disgustin, a disgusted me fuckin self. . . . [N]ot
ser much solid cack as just thick juice, like, yer know, poo juice like
fuckin mulligatawny soup, an it ad all run down me legs so a hadter
wipe irall up with bog roll which broke like so a gorrit all over me
fuckin ands as well . . . [*Gr*, 236]

As Colm admits, however, John's beliefs 'ar is armour, an a difficult one ter dent' [*Gr*, 334]. Indeed, in his foregrounding of the abject, Colm merely confirms for John the validity of those beliefs, Colm being nothing but a '[d]irty fuckin thievin gyppo cunt' [*Gr*, 238]. Echoing Colm's own use of the word 'cunt', John's language illustrates the mutual loathing and disgust that he and Colm feel, each representing to the other all that is abject and abhorrent.

Such abjection is an inherently ambivalent process, however, and is arguably indicative, on Colm's part, of his deepest fears of contamination by all that John and his 'diseased ideas' represent. Dissecting John's self-deluding belief

that he is 'rejecting the system', Colm has the following to say:

A mean, how threatening is a person oo sits in a mildewy box uvver room all dey, smokin weed an drinkin strong Spar cider, gigglin at *Kilroy* and *Teletubbies*, convincin themselves like Oxford John that they'd be berrer off if the Nazis had uv won the fuckin war? Ey? Exackly. [*Gr*, 335-6]

People like John, Colm asserts, are unable to acknowledge 'ther true impotence', 'thee ar inherently unable to appreciate how strong an insidious the system rerly fuckin is' [*Gr*, 335]. Interestingly, though, Colm's critique of Oxford John is paralleled by a similar tendency towards self-delusion and 'a false illusion uv power' [*Gr*, 335] on his own part. As I illustrate below, for example, Colm's assertion that drugs offer 'freedom' [*Gr*, 292] is every bit as delusional as John's belief that he is 'rejecting the system'. Furthermore, his singing of Irish rebel songs with Liam is derided by Malcolm in terms which echo Colm's attack on John:

They sing it wiv gusto, some real venom, as if theh bein really fuckin subversive, as if gettin pissed by a lake in the Welsh mountains at two a'clock in tha mawnin will in any way alta that cunt Major's policies in Ulster. As if. Pair av bleedin dipsticks. [*Gr*, 450]

Again, like John, Colm becomes paranoid [*Gr*, 344], unable to distinguish 'between fantasy an reality' [*Gr*, 450], while Malcolm observes that he is 'rapidly

becomin . . . sammink which ee useta hate' [*Gr*, 451]: he will end up in 'a scummy little bedsit somewhere . . . rantin abaht imself an ow great he is an becomin an embarrassment, a burden, an a bore ta evryone oo knows im' [*Gr*, 442]. Colm's abjection of Oxford John is thus also an abjection of himself; the disgust and loathing that he feels for John and all that he represents is also indicative of a more pervasive self-disgust, a recognition of his own capacity, and that of humanity in general, to commit unimaginable atrocities. Indeed, for Colm, it is humanity in its entirety that Nazi atrocities implicate; it is the whole notion of the human self that has been rendered abject and meaningless: 'The Nazis an wha they did effectively ended fer ever any fuckin faith at all in the perfectability of humanity' [*Gr*, 130-1].

Such deep self-loathing is indicative of Colm's inability to abject successfully. Indeed, he seems at times overwhelmed by the horror and enormity of a discursive inheritance that, while appalling him, he is unable to reject: 'God, the blitz, the atom bombs, the Holocaust . . . it was a catastrophe from which will never fully recuvver' [*Gr*, 130]. The implicit suggestion that language itself has been tainted provides perhaps one reason why Colm is led to 'search ferra different *kind* uv freedom through such things as drugs and sex, thee only arenas left to us wher we can be if not truly free then at least more free than anywher else'. More than simply providing 'freedom', drugs offer a religious, even transcendental experience, outside the socio-symbolic order of a society Colm despises: '[They] allow you ter realise an appreciate tha original magic tha lies under yer life' [*Gr*, 292]. Colm's escalating drug use and sexual experimentation thus amount to an almost spiritual quest for meaning, a displaced metaphysical attempt to access a reality more lasting and 'real' than that which is mediated via language. The

sensations that accompany drug use, for instance, are explicitly described by Colm in terms of an accumulation of self-presence that language cannot match. Injecting amphetamines is a 'state tha can never be approximated by anythin else', a state that is 'too fuckin massive fer werds' [*Gr*, 291]; indeed, it is 'beyond werds, beyond life an its simple biology, this is fuckin about in tha realm tha only angels and demons are familiar with' [*Gr*, 315].

Colm's eulogising of amphetamines is paralleled in his characterisation of sexual perversity as a prolific and multiple force which dismantles and undermines narrow, limiting ideologies:

. . . polymorphic perversity . . . my sexuality, thee only *parter* me
 which cannot be controlled . . . it frees energies inside me, mad
 energies, which threaten your cosy an proscribed view uv how the
 world should be, they reinvest that world wither rich colours an
 tastes tharrit was made in originally, before you crept out of the
 closet with yer fuckin bleach and sandpaper an sought ter destroy
 all which ley outside yer narrow weakly-beating breast cos it fuckin
scerd you an you hated it cos it spoke ter parts inside you which
 you wanted to, *needed* to suppress an deny that you had . . . [*Gr*,
 289]

There is more than a hint of Milton's Satan – 'Evil, be thou my Good'²⁶ – in this ode to sexual transgression: 'my sexuality, thee only *parter* me' (note the possible pun of *part of* and *partner*) – a suggestion that is given added weight by Colm's

imaging of drug use ('yer feel like an angel evicted from Heaven' [*Gr*, 291]). Like drugs, sex is romanticised as a means of returning to an Edenic world unmediated by language, a 'werld wither rich colours an tastes tharrit was made in originally'. Indeed, both constitute a search for authenticity, an attempt 'ter become a whole person, true ter yerself like, stable n balanced an healthy' [*Gr*, 288].

However, if sexual experimentation and drug use take one 'beyond werds', they nevertheless conform to a pattern very similar to words. As with Colm's linguistic grapplings with the abject, for instance, drugs point to the borders of selfhood and subjectivity: in the words of Roger, they 'shew yew yer own death' [*Gr*, 101]. Similarly, there can be no access to an original perverse plenitude ('polymorphic perversity') without a corresponding loss of subjectivity; deviant desire remains part of the same symbolic order it transgresses.²⁷ Paradoxically, therefore, sex, like language, becomes a marker of absence, its exploration of the 'adventurous' [*Gr*, 288] constituting a supplementary search for pleasure which can never be entirely satisfied, presence being displaced at its moment of apparent revelation. Furthermore, as with his grotesque descriptions of the body and its functions, the threat of physical disgust, like the negative correlate of his transgressive desire, inevitably seems to shadow Colm's 'polymorphic perversity': 'A press the duvet tight ter me chest with me arm so the shite smell dozen waft up from me knob. Occupational hazard.' [*Gr*, 290].

Colm's sensitivity to the horrors of physical contamination and transgression again possesses parallels with the character of Gwydion. Unlike Trystan, for instance, whose grotesque images emerge where competing discourses

overlap, the grotesque language of both Colm and Gwydion constitutes a reaction to the complete breakdown of all such forms of explanatory narratives, and thus of stable, autonomous subjectivities – a difference which helps to explain the more overtly nihilistic horror apparent in their grotesque imagery. To Gwydion, the horror and suffering which he has experienced throughout the world call into question the natures of humanity and God, the Christian narratives which construct meaning. Attacking what he sees as Trystan's naive adherence to the religion of his grandmother, Gwydion describes the appalling squalor and physical humiliation of humankind that he has encountered around the world:

You have not experienced the cheap life of the East. You have not encountered the squalor and the disease. You do not know the stink and the misery and the world's indifference. In Shanghai, the maggot-dripping stump of a dying mendicant's forearm was thrust at me beseeching alms. In Persia I passed through the stench of the lazar-hovels where the eyes of swarming pox-blinded beggars were encrusted with flies. . . . In the streets of Mexico City I saw every night the children asleep in the gutters. And year after year your God permits it, Trystan. . . . Your God is also the creator of man's brutish nature. Your fidelity arises from the supposition that the norm of existence on this planet is the life of this small enclave of your birth and upbringing; where for a brief moment some equity is regarded; where protest is possible; where conscience is permitted some tenderness. But this is in reality a minute clearing of relative justice and order into which the jungle might at any moment return.

That is what life for the denizens of this cosmic perineum in reality
is. [*VCV*, 299-300]²⁸

However, to view the world through the life-negating imagery of scatological discourse – to Gwydion, Trystan says, the earth is ‘excrementitious and the befouled waters a cloaca’ [*VCV*, 251] – is to draw, as Trystan’s description suggests, on the same language as preacher and bible, condemning the world for its very ‘worldliness’. In a sense, Gwydion condemns God in God’s own language: he sees the contradictions in Christianity (in particular, the irruption of chaos and evil from within a divinely ordained order) but cannot escape its discursive structure: Gwydion, says Trystan, ‘believes, deeply he believes, in God, in his brutish and incalculable God, the daft, gifted, and vindictive begetter of this hideous universe’ [*VCV*, 300]. Like Caradoc Evans, one might argue, Gwydion is implicated in the very discourse that he is striving to reject.

More playfully than Gwydion, Colm self-consciously parodies the language of religion, standing ‘[I]ike some demented preachersmahn’ with his ‘ahms flung wide’ in order to denounce the God who could create the rotting, dying sheep the group have stumbled across:

–Look arrih, just fuckin look arrih. Oo made tha? Tha unfortunate
an vile scrap uv life? Wha kind uv twisted fuckin brain, wha fuckin
demons’ dreaming, wha fuckin fevered nightmer . . . wha warped
an mental . . . [*Gr*, 139]

This passage is similar in its sentiments and structure to one found in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, and helps explain Colm's attraction to the novelist:

What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle.²⁹

Such passages suggest – as does Gwydion's horror at life's chaotic squalor – that the grotesque borders on the abject at the point where religious belief falters: where the sordidness of life – which many Christian denominations preach – is not offset by the existence of a consolatory afterlife. Indeed, it is significant that throughout *Grits* the spiritual is continually parodied and rewritten in the language of the grotesque. Malcolm, for instance, sees the dead sheep as 'tha angel of death', 'the first fuckin herald ov tha cammin apocalypse': '–We will be ashered into the next world by a rotten, one-oid, shit-ciked sheep. Jast fuckin reward fa a useless, wasted, drug-addled life' [*Gr*, 138]. The transformation of the spiritual into the grotesque is thus again directly linked to a collapse of meaning – 'a useless, wasted, drug-addled life' – in a manner which hints at a continuing need for spiritual modes of discourse. To Malcolm and Colm, however, traditional biblical discourse is an 'empty' language, and can only be parodied by the grotesque, rewritten in the 'realities' of the body.

Nevertheless, while unable to believe in the metaphysical, Colm cannot jettison it completely. Behind what might at first appear to be a liberating delight in

describing the corporeal, there is considerable metaphysical angst. Colm's parodic denunciation of Christianity, for example, is symptomatic of a physical disgust directed both inwards and outwards – a disgust provoked by the absence of (and need for) an underlying metaphysical order:

–Yer see what ther is ter look forwuds to, Sion? Werms, maggots,
decay, stink . . . ar bones'll be bared ter the wind an the gaze uv
wasters. Wharrer fuckin mess. This is all we fuckin ar, innit? . . .
[I]t only takes one wee step sideways out uv ar lives an wer in the
swarmin horrors which lie under evrythin. [*Gr*, 397]

However, such a passage itself echoes many biblical sentiments. Colm's nihilism, his desire for 'simple oblivion' [*Gr*, 329], can itself be viewed as the residing shadow of religious belief, a product not so much of Colm's libertarian amorality, but his residual *morality*: his disgust at a world that is as out of joint as the 'nightmarishly, hysterically disproportionate legs' of the spiders which so unnerve him ('if yer could see a scream uv pain, that's wharrit would look like' [*GR*, 307]).

In contrast to the truly religious, however, Colm cannot believe in a consolatory afterlife. His disgust at the physical and its temporality – 'the sickness uv this cellular fuckin existence' [*Gr*, 327] – can only find expression through an ambivalent scatological description: a description whose disgust is simultaneously inflected by a liberating delight for life in its grotesque essence. Indeed, Colm is drawn relentlessly to 'the swarmin horrors' which scatter meaning, both delighting and terrifying him. The language of grotesque realism is used repeatedly to rewrite

and deconstruct all that is spiritual and sacred. His deflection of an enquiry from Sioned, for example, is telling in its juxtaposition of the physical and metaphysical:

[W]hy are you so obsessed with arses an shit an stuff?

You're always goin on about em. Why're you so fascinated like?

He smiles: –I feel the need to mask my divine essence in scatological camouflage. In order to protect it like. [*Gr*, 398]

Far from masking a 'divine essence', Colm asserts time and time again that his 'scatological camouflage' hides nothing; that it *is* the essence: 'So menny bodily fluids, so much goo an gunk; that's all wer made up of, us jellylike, dripping beings – blood, brine, piss, spunk, tears, smeg, spew, snot . . .' [*Gr*, 277]. Even the 'I' of one's linguistic selfhood is illusory: the memories which 'restage' existence, which 'replay' one's own narrative to create the sense of a stable, unified self, are nothing but a 'defense mechanism', 'a shelterin thicket ter hide within' [*Gr*, 326].

That Colm can talk about the physical in such a way, however, again reveals a certain religious sensibility: a mind in perpetual and agonising quest for metaphysical meaning even while bent on deconstructing all such meaning. His despairing rhetorical question after discovering a dead woman in the harbour – ' . . . is this it, then, is this all ther is? White n bloated, floppin about in the waves? Bein eaten by fish an crabs, floppin uselessly about, naked, rotting, bloated . . . aw fuck' [*Gr*, 320] – is itself expressive of a characteristic attempt to reconcile the grotesque, physical realities of life and its processes with a deep-seated human need for the spiritual and the metaphysical. In this respect, *Grits* closely resembles

The Valley, The City, The Village, a novel which, in its reaction to life's physicality, is similarly characterised by both exhilaration and desperation, a revelling in life's chaotic variety and a despair at its ultimate meaninglessness. The anguish in *Grits*, of course, is far more acute, reflecting the further erosion of community, religious belief, and the Welsh language since the 1950s. Nevertheless, both novels share a yearning for a stability of meaning and identity no longer readily available within their respective societies. Both are also united in their sense of human suffering and the universe's seeming indifference to that suffering. Colm's despair at the sight of the human corpse, for example, finds its parallel in Iwan Morgan Parry's anguished appeal to the cosmos for a physical acknowledgement of the dead, their suffering, and their achievements:

You, golden stars and glittering systems, you, bright moon, your
silver earths not enriched by grave, or burial, or honoured bones,
you, as our sad planet passes amongst you, draw aside from your
orbits and with muffled music or silence salute her journey across
your universe, for her soil is the burial ground of our virtuous, of
our mighty, and of our beloved. [*VCV*, 252]

Such an acknowledgement of humanity's spiritual 'realities' is, of course, impossible, a Romantic imposition of human desire upon an inhuman universe. Human suffering is, in its own terms, meaningless, but it is a meaninglessness which, in this passage, is nevertheless invested with a dignity (and therefore some sort of meaning) by the very eloquence of the passage's appeal to meaning's absence – the impassive universe which moves immutably to its own physical laws

regardless of human love and human loyalties – and its affirmation of the value of human life and its achievements. Indeed, Iwan Parry's defiant construction of meaning in the midst of its absence finds a deep resonance with Trystan, and helps avert any incipient nihilism. In *Grits*, however, Colm cannot hold on to any such meaning, and it is worth emphasising that Glyn Jones's own faith in humanity and God is profoundly undermined elsewhere in his writing by the horror of human suffering. In a late poem, 'Seven Keys to Shaderdom', for example, Shader can no longer reconcile himself to the appalling images he has seen on television, retreating into a nihilistic horror at life's hideousness which is the complete reversal of Iwan Parry's affirmation of human life, but which reflects accurately Colm's most anguished existential thoughts: 'meaningless itself was then / Without all meaning, was become vain, barren, dead and meaningless'.³⁰

¹ Thomas, *Neb*, p. 123 (my trans.). The original Welsh reads: 'Fel y mae ei fywyd yn dechrau dod i ben a oes gan R. S. unrhyw neges, unrhyw gyngor i'w roi? Dim. Chafodd o ddim digon o brofiad o fywyd dyn i fentro pregethu i neb. Mae pobl yn tueddu i drigo yn ei ddychymyg yn lle bod yn rhan o'i brofiad personol. Gan nad oedd yn nofelydd, doedd dim angen canlyn pobl yn glôs er mwyn eu hastudio'n fanwl i fod yn gymeriadau byw mewn llyfr. Ei syniad am bobl ydi bod yna rai da a rhai drwg, gyda charfan fawr ddiddrwg ddidda yn y canol, sy'n mynd ar ei hynt anniddorol bob dydd. Mae'n peri gofid iddo fod mwy o Saeson nag o Gymry yn gwerthfawrogi harddwch Cymru. Mae'n siomedig iawn bod y Saeson ar y cyfan yn fwy gwybodus am adar a blodau ein gwlad nag ydym ni'n hunain. Y maent hefyd yn barotach i sefyll dros eu hiaith nag ydi'r rhan fwyaf o'n cyd-Gymry.'

² Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 46.

³ Dafydd Johnston, 'The Development of Idris Davies's Poetry', in Idris Davies, *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. lxxii, lxxi.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview' [1986], in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edn. (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 133. For the relationship between the semiotic and the abject in Kristeva's thinking, see Chapter 7 below.

⁵ The structure of *Grits* itself exemplifies Bakhtin's thesis, deploying eleven narrative voices from different areas of Wales, England and Ireland; a third-person narrator; and extracts from 'A Personal Guide to West Wales', written by a now-deceased student. Given the consequent complexity of any analysis of heteroglossia within the novel as a whole, I will restrict my own discussion to the character of Colm, who, out of all the novel's 'voices', provides the best example of the relationship between heteroglossia and the abject grotesque.

⁶ Jones, *Collected Stories*, p. lx. Brown refers in this passage to Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

⁷ For an earlier, slightly different version of much of the remainder of this chapter, see Harri Roberts, 'A Tower of Babel: Heteroglossia, the Grotesque, and the (De)construction of Meaning in

Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village* and Niall Griffiths's *Grits*', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Vol. 7 (2001-02), pp. 106-29.

⁸ Genesis 11:9: 'Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth. . . .'

⁹ Genesis 11:4. In the biblical tale, it is interesting to note the association of a unified language with full creative presence: 'And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do' (Genesis 11:6). The allusion to the Babel myth by both Griffiths and Jones also recalls Dylan Thomas's depiction of himself as 'Shut, too, in a tower of words'. That it is a tower, with all its phallic connotations, that is repeatedly deployed as a symbol of language in Western culture is perhaps no coincidence, recalling the role that Lacan ascribes to the phallus in the signifying process.

¹⁰ For a translation of this tale, see Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (eds.), *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Dent, 1949), pp. 137-52.

¹¹ Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures*, p. 104. My reading of *The Valley, The City, The Village* is greatly indebted to Thomas's remarks on this novel.

¹² See Glyn Jones, *The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996).

¹³ Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures*, p. 103.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note the following characterisation of sudden linguistic change: 'Patterns of thought which in the parent speech would have been integrated into a whole way of life are left loose and noisy on the surface of the mind. People become linguistic opportunists, at the mercy of short-term emotions' (Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, p. 53). Conran's comment on the poetry of Dylan Thomas – 'The words he uses seem so unaware of their own history' (p. 203) – is also pertinent.

¹⁵ Jones, *Collected Poems*, p. 42.

¹⁶ See Tony Brown, 'Shock, strangeness, wonder: Glyn Jones and the art of fiction', *New Welsh Review*, No. 23 (Winter 1993-94), p. 44, and the same author's Introduction to Jones, *Collected Stories*, p. lix.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Jones, 'Merthyr', *Collected Poems*, p. 42.

¹⁹ Glyn Jones, *Goodbye, What Were You?* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994), p. 64.

²⁰ Colm's wry description of the dead woman – 'Ther's an empty crisp bag tangled round one uvver feet an ther's a Coke can wedged inner armpit. Which seems liker perfect summation, definition uv death: being unable ter push the garbage away' [*Gr*, 328] – suggests its own definition of death as an inability to abject.

²¹ Compare Colm's sentiments with the following passage (spoken by Danny) in Griffiths's second novel *Sheepshagger*: 'I mean God, heaven, sin, retribution, all iss bleedin stuff, it's all about a, a yearning, a need; it's about somethin that we all want, somethin for us all to believe in, a fuckin afterlife or somethin or maybe just some kind of fuckin meaning to *this* one. I dunno. Just, like, something to live for. Otherwise we're all fucked. The whole human world is fucked' (Niall Griffiths, *Sheepshagger* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), pp. 124-5).

²² W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* [1990] (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 632.

²³ Thomas, *Letters*, p. 297.

²⁴ Stephen Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 108.

²⁵ A passage in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (a novel to which Griffiths is clearly indebted) describes a similar transformation of disgust into art. Suffering from diarrhoea in an atrocious pub toilet, Renton captures 'a huge, filthy bluebottle' in his hand, crushing it to death. He then uses 'its guts, tissue and blood as ink' in order to scrawl the name of local football team HIBS on the cubicle wall: 'The vile bluebottle, which caused me a great deal of distress, has been transformed intae a work of art which gives me much pleasure tae look at' (Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* [1993] (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 25-6).

²⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1667] (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 88.

²⁷ 'What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights' [*HS*, 7]. See also the section on Foucault in Chapter 1 of this study.

²⁸ For a similar imaging of 'the cheap life of the East', which also associates 'the jungle' with the implosion of meaningful order, see Alun Lewis's poem 'The Jungle', in Alun Lewis, *Collected Poems*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 1994), pp. 155-8.

²⁹ Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 130.

³⁰ Jones, *Collected Poems*, p. 116.

7

Writing the Female Body: Margiad Evans's *Wooden****Doctor and Rachel Trezise's Goldfish Bowl***

In her essay, 'The Body of Signification', Elizabeth Gross has noted the similarities between Kristeva's account of the abject and the 'broader category' of the semiotic: not only, she points out, are both categories located 'on the side of the feminine in Kristeva's work', they also share the ambivalent position of being 'both a necessary condition of the subject, and what must be expelled or repressed by the subject in order to attain identity and a place within the symbolic'.¹ The significance of such similarities for an investigation into the relationship of women to the abject – indeed, for the very notion that there is a specifically female relationship to the abject – is evident in the following comments by Kristeva on the dangers for women of semiotic identification with the maternal body:

The question is: do men and women identify in the same way with the archaic mother? Formally, I don't really see a difference. Psychologically, I would say it's more difficult for women, because a woman is confronted by something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same. Because we are two women. Whereas for a man she's an other. For men this identification with the maternal involves a perverse pleasure, whilst for women there are psychotic risks attached. I might lose myself, lose my identity.

This explains perhaps why it's more difficult for women to get out of hell, this descent: Orpheus manages it but Eurydice doesn't.²

As with the abject, Kristeva identifies the semiotic as a resurgence of the archaic maternal: a resurgence that, while a potential source of *jouissance*, can also threaten to overwhelm the symbolic defences that sustain a sense of unified subjectivity. For the female subject, such risks are seen as particularly high, the identification with the maternal that semiotic modes of expression entail threatening the loss of the symbolic differentiation that guarantees the subject's being. Whereas the male subject is able to express his repressed 'femininity' via the mediation of the symbolic, thereby maintaining, as Gross observes, 'an imperilled hold on the symbolic and a stable speaking position',³ such an option is not available for the female subject – or at the least rendered problematic: to identify as a woman with the archaic maternal is, for Kristeva, to risk losing one's identity altogether. While it is women writers who are seen as particularly prone to such psychosis, Kristeva is clear that the threat posed by the archaic maternal to the female self is one that hangs over all women. As any creative utterance involves 'an identification with the maternal',⁴ to speak or write as a woman is in itself to be confronted with one's own abject status, a status that can be either disavowed through a rigid adherence to paternal symbolic authority (and a consequent suppression of female passions and desires), or embraced with all the attendant risks to symbolic identity that this may entail.⁵

While recognising the suggestive power of Kristeva's account, a number of feminist critics have resisted what they see as Kristeva's identification of the maternal/semiotic with the feminine – the latter, they argue, being a cultural construct which necessarily postdates entry into the symbolic. In a sympathetic reading of Kristeva's work, Toril Moi has attempted to refute this charge:

The claim advanced by the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective and by Beverly Brown and Parveen Adams that Kristeva associates the semiotic with the feminine is . . . based on a misreading. The fluid motility of the semiotic is indeed associated with the pre-Oedipal phase, and therefore with the pre-Oedipal mother, but Kristeva makes it quite clear that like Freud and Klein she sees the pre-Oedipal mother as a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity. This fantasmatic figure, which looms as large for baby boys as for baby girls, cannot, as Brown and Adams are well aware, be reduced to an example of 'femininity', for the simple reason that the opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality. And Kristeva knows this as well as anybody.⁶

Despite the forcefulness of Moi's defence, her principal assertion that 'Kristeva makes it quite clear that . . . she sees the pre-Oedipal mother as a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity . . . [and] which looms as large for baby boys as for baby girls' simply does not stand up to the evidence of Kristeva's own writing. Indeed, far from transcending gender distinctions, Kristeva's

conception of the archaic mother is insistent in its identification of this figure *with* 'woman': in the archaic maternal, she asserts, 'a woman is confronted by something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same. Because we are two women.' It is not only difficult to see how such a statement could possibly be read in any way other than that which Brown, Adams, and the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective have done; Kristeva's assertion also draws attention to a fundamental problem in her account of the female subject's relationship to the maternal. By adopting the practice of Kristeva, for instance, and identifying the archaic maternal unambiguously as a woman (the subject's own mother?), we are already locating this maternal figure within the symbolic order – within, that is, the system of gender differences that this order establishes. If, however, we follow Moi's more persuasive characterisation of the archaic maternal as a 'fantasmatic figure' which pre-exists gender, we are faced with the problem of explaining why Kristeva should believe women to be more susceptible to losing their grip on the symbolic than men, as neither gender would then experience identification with the maternal as a loss of differentiation in 'the same' ('the opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality'). In both cases, therefore, it becomes difficult to accept Kristeva's contention that to identify with the maternal as a woman is necessarily to risk losing one's identity altogether.

Despite such concerns about Kristeva's depiction of the pre-Oedipal mother, the main import of her argument nevertheless remains difficult to refute: that marginalised and coded abject within patriarchal language, women must necessarily struggle to acquire a stable subject position as women. While such a position is practically an article of faith within contemporary feminist theory, less

thoroughly explored is the complex position of women within a society, such as that of Wales, that has itself been declared abject within the official discourse of a dominant colonial power. Within Wales, for instance, particularly following the notorious Blue Books Report of 1847, the already difficult task of acquiring an identity as a woman was compounded by the further need to negotiate the oppressive power structures of colonial representation, structures within which Welsh culture *per se* was deemed irredeemably abject. Significantly, moreover, this process of coding all things Welsh as abject drew upon the same discursive strategies and conceptual categories that provided the means of marginalising and silencing the voices of women; the oppression of the one subaltern group was, in short, intimately intermeshed with, and often reinforced by, the oppression of the other. Represented in terms of absence, deviancy and immaturity in a way that echoed traditional constructs of the feminine, Welsh culture and identity were, as we have seen, repeatedly feminised and infantilised within English discourse, from the 1847 Report's condemnation of Welsh immorality to David Holbrook's objections to Dylan Thomas during the 1960s. The converse effect of this feminisation of Welsh culture was the transformation of the female body itself into a privileged locus and transcoder of cultural and national debates, the ideological battleground upon which Welsh morality was both defended and maligned. For Welsh culture's defenders as well as its detractors, the female body and female sexuality acted as a metonym for wider social and moral concerns, the means by which cultural and national integrity might be (and often were) evaluated and judged.

The centrality of the female body to representations of Welsh identity, from both within and outside of Wales, possessed major implications for the development of a specifically female identity within Welsh culture, none of which might be regarded as positive. So as to refute the accusations of licentiousness and general sexual immorality made in the 1847 Report, Welsh women were charged by their male compatriots with the responsibility of maintaining at all times an unimpeachable front of respectability: their moral duty was never simply to themselves, but to the good name of both Welsh men and their country at large. Although women thus played a central defining role in the construction of Welsh identity, this was at the cost of any identity they might possess as women; as the passive object of metonymic appropriation, the Welsh woman, as Jane Aaron argues, was always in a position of being defined by others, never by herself:

Either she abandoned her Welsh allegiances and adopted the English middle-class model of refined femininity, however inappropriate it may have been to her cultural roots and her social position; or she defensively asserted her Welshness in the face of insult, and, to prove its virtues, clad herself in an armour of strict propriety which would inevitably have entailed self-suppression on a larger scale than mere sexual self-control; or she accepted the English definition of herself as the libidinous hoyden of primitive Wild Wales. None of these possible identities afforded her a voice of her own. . . .⁷

The suppression of female identity that Aaron describes here was not, moreover, limited to the immediate aftermath of the 1847 Report. As she notes, Welsh culture continued to insist on female ‘respectability’ ‘long after behaviour patterns had changed in England’ and thus long after the need to disprove the Report’s conclusions might be said to exist: ‘as late as 1966 a woman could still die of shame in a Welsh novel because she had all unwittingly had an affair with a married man’. Citing parallels with other colonised countries, Aaron locates this phenomenon within a postcolonial paradigm, arguing that ‘this type of conservative retention of repressive behaviour patterns inculcated by the colonizing culture, after that culture has itself abandoned them, is . . . a common trait. . . . It is as if the wounds inflicted on racial self-esteem during the colonizing process can only be healed by a continuing repression and denial of behaviour which the imperial culture once castigated as “barbaric”.’⁸

Certainly, prior to the feminist revolution of the 1960s, the strength in Wales of the cultural prohibitions surrounding the female body and its sexuality made it extremely difficult for Welsh women writers to engage directly with such themes. One woman writer who was able to do so, however, was the English-born poet and novelist Margiad Evans, a writer whose elective Welshness derived, as Barbara Prys-Williams has noted, ‘from an imaginative affinity and romantic attachment to the idea of the country rather than from any extensive experience of its reality’.⁹ Indeed, as I shall show via a discussion of Evans’s first full-length novel, *The Wooden Doctor*, Wales (ironically) came to represent for Evans freedom from the constraints and restrictions of her native bourgeois English society, somewhere her sexuality could express itself openly without sense of the

abject. The colonial implications of such an imaging of Wales are, of course, clear,¹⁰ but it is interesting to note a thematic counterpart to Evans's discovery of an identity on the far side of the Welsh/English border in a recent novel by Rachel Trezise, *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl*. Exploring the impact of unemployment, family breakdown, and economic deprivation through the eyes of a Rhondda girl growing up during the 1980s and '90s, Trezise's novel illustrates the difficulties faced by many women in Wales of establishing a coherent sense of self and identity within a society that continues to code the female body as abject. For Trezise like Evans, I argue, the acquisition of such an identity might sometimes be seen as only possible elsewhere.

Romancing the Border: Margiad Evans and Wales

At first glance, Margiad Evans might appear to be a strange choice for consideration in a study of Welsh writing in English. Born Peggy Eileen Whistler in Uxbridge, near London, Evans was neither Welsh by birth or residency, her sole connection with Wales deriving from her maternal grandmother, Ann Evans, whose surname she appropriated as part of her nom de plume.¹¹ However, what makes Margiad Evans of interest to this study is not any tenuous family connection to Wales but the strength of her attachment to the border country of Herefordshire, a region to which she moved just prior to her eleventh birthday in 1920. It is worth noting that the Herefordshire countryside was not then unknown to her: two years previously she had made a brief visit with her father to his sister's farm near Ross-on-Wye, and the powerful impression that the surrounding countryside, and in

particular the river Wye, then made upon her – what she describes as her ‘premonition of passion’ for the border landscape – is recorded in her unpublished memoir ‘The Immortal Hospital’:

He himself looked silently on the wide strong water – for it was autumn and the river running high. After some moments he turned away, expecting me to follow him. I did not. He called. I still looked at the river, and some powerful emotion began to rise in me, some desperate adoration. He called again. I turned away and followed him, but when he looked down . . . he saw me in a passion of tears. With consternation he stooped, coaxed. What was the matter? All I could sob was: ‘O don’t, don’t take me away from this place. Oh Dad can’t I stay *here*?’ . . . For nearly a year the fields and the river lay dormant in my consciousness, through many unchildish sins and unchildish repentance, I would repeat: ‘They are There’, not in language but in mind.¹²

Whether this description of Margiad Evans’s first encounter with the Herefordshire countryside is viewed as an accurate reconstruction of a childhood memory or the adult projection of a dying woman forced to live out her final years in a Sussex hospital,¹³ what is striking is the intensity with which Evans identifies with the border landscape. Indeed, what Evans describes is nothing less than a merging of this landscape with her youthful self: ‘the fields and the river’ enter her ‘consciousness’ so deeply that they reiterate their presence ‘not in language but in mind’. To be removed from this landscape is thus for Evans to be quite literally

estranged from the very essence of her being, to be reduced, as she recalls, to the inarticulacy of tearful abjection.

‘The Immortal Hospital’ is not the only place in Margiad Evans’s work where this powerful sense of attachment to the border landscape is expressed in such striking fashion. The late poem ‘To my sister Sian’ (her younger sister Nancy Whistler) also recalls, through its evocation of a carefree childhood spent wandering the Herefordshire countryside, a merging of self with landscape that transcended linguistic definition:

All the places were us, we were all the places,
and the inscrutable innocent altars of nature.
I see two children slipping into a wood
speechlessly happy. Two lives have not changed it.
For our ways, our fields, our river, our lostness
were children. So we were our country.¹⁴

Again, the young sisters literally become the countryside through which they roam; the poem refuses to distinguish between their childhood selves and the border landscape in which they are ‘speechlessly happy’ (as is emphasised by the grammatical ambiguity of this phrase: it could refer just as easily to the ‘wood’ as the ‘two children’). The use of the word ‘country’ in this context is of particular note, especially so when it is considered that in the accepted political and cultural senses of the term, the ‘country’ which the two sisters literally become is no country at all, but the border itself: that region which straddles the dividing line

between Wales and England, partaking of the qualities of both but somehow remaining separate from either. This is far from being an insignificant point, for as is evident throughout her letters, journals and creative work, it is as a border writer, rather than a specifically Welsh or English writer, that Margiad Evans tended to regard herself: '*I am the border*' she once wrote to the Anglo-Welsh novelist Gwyn Jones.¹⁵ What might be regarded (in Kristevan terms) as the dangerous ambiguity of the border – its potential to be at once on the inside and the outside of what it delimits, so threatening that which it also establishes – is thus perceived by Evans not as abject – that fearful place where speech and identity founder – but as the very essence of her creative being.

There is a paradox in this identification with the border, for in the very act of attempting to recapture in writing her childhood encounter with the border country, Evans also insists upon the impossibility of succeeding in this endeavour: the profound nature of her childhood experiences not only transcends linguistic definition, but, by implication, any linguistically rooted conception of selfhood as well ('I would repeat: "They are There", not in language but in mind'; 'two children slipping into a wood / speechlessly happy'). It is precisely this problem that Evans strives to overcome in her (misleadingly entitled) *Autobiography* (1943):

Why is it that all my visions avoid me? I believe it is the darkness of the house – and oh the cold! For when I'm walking about upon the little paths among the bushes, my visions are there under my feet and they have words with them. But when I come in – oh I can't

explain. I want words. More words for colour – for the blue which is beyond the grey sky; for another blue which the hills keep for days and which is *substantial* in a disappearing earth – and another word for haze or mist which is not dimness any more than the stars not shining is their nonentity. I want words which open, words for space, words which *will not bend the thought*. Is there such language? I believe there is. I believe I hear it. I aspire.¹⁶

Although the optimism with which this passage ends is not always maintained (in the process of writing, it is noted, there is always ‘a loss of *something* which no pondering and no effort can bring back’),¹⁷ Evans returns on numerous occasions in this text to the problem of what might be termed language’s own ‘borders’, and the difficult task of expanding its capacity to capture and record the endless wonder and profundity of the natural world around her. No doubt this preoccupation can be linked back to her self-identification as a border writer: it is, after all, precisely along such cultural fractures that narratives of identity often break down, just as nature itself teems across the artificial boundaries within which language attempts to order and control it. The role of gender should also not be discounted. As Julia Kristeva has argued, because language is a gendered and largely male construct in each culture, to be a woman is itself to exist on a border, to inhabit the very margins of patriarchal thought in a way not easily reducible to linguistic terms: ‘I . . . understand by “woman” that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies.’¹⁸ As far as Margiad Evans in particular is concerned, one might also observe that it is within the world of nature – that world whose multihued complexities she

struggles to express – that patriarchal ideology has traditionally located femininity. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that just as women have been repeatedly ‘othered’ within patriarchal culture in order to define a stable masculine identity, nature too has been subjected, as Evans notes, to a ‘tortured symbolism in which creation is molten and twisted into the form of *self*’.¹⁹ Quite possibly, then, Evans unconsciously perceived in the Welsh border landscape a reflection of her own social and cultural marginality as a woman, a marginality which, although in one sense disempowering, she may well have found attractive in its offer of freedom from patriarchal norms. Her problem, however, was to find a language in which she could articulate such freedom, to ‘translate’²⁰ what was peripheral and marginal within patriarchal discourse – that did not possess a name – into symbolic terms.

With their foregrounding of the ambiguous and the ambivalent, the people and landscape of the border undoubtedly helped to enable such a process. In Evans’s first novel *Country Dance*, published when she was only twenty-three, it is the cultural tensions and conflicts which beset the border region that provide the principal focus, although even here it is notable how these are viewed via the palimpsest of landscape. As its narrator comments at the close of the novel:

All old stories, even the authenticated, even the best remembered, are painted in greys and lavenders – dim, faint hues of the past which do no more than whisper of the glory of colour they once possessed. Yet live awhile in these remote places where these pale pictures were painted, and something of their first freshness

will return to them, if only in the passing of a homestead or the mowing of a field. You will come to know how the dead may hold tenure of lands that were once theirs, and how echoes of their lives that are lost at a distance linger about their doorways. Here among the hills and valleys, the tall trees and swift rivers, the bland pastures and sullen woods, lie long shadows of things that have been. [CD, 96]

The ‘old story’ that *Country Dance* tells is that of Ann Goodman, a young woman of mixed Welsh and English blood who is violently murdered by a rejected suitor, the English shepherd Gabriel Ford, after she has chosen to marry his Welsh rival, Evan ap Evans, the employer of Ann’s own English shepherd father. While the vast bulk of the tale is narrated in the words of Ann’s own journal, this ‘first-hand’ account of Ann’s life is supplemented by an introduction and epilogue by the ostensible ‘discoverer’ of ‘her book’ [CD, vii] – a framing device that serves to make explicit the wider import of Ann’s story, most notably the importance of the border and its divisive character as a shaping presence in the tragic events of her life. Ann’s journal, the epilogue asserts, is not merely ‘the insignificant prelude to a commonplace disaster’, but ‘the record of a mind . . . which though clear in itself was never conscious of the two nations at war within it. Here is represented the entire history of the Border, just as the living Ann must have represented it herself’ [CD, 95]. The choice that Ann is forced to make, between Welshman and Englishman, is thus linked explicitly to her own mixed parentage and conflicting national sentiments, to the presence, in short, of the border within her.

If, though, the border is a source of conflict and division in *Country Dance*, a cultural rift running through the land and minds of those who live in its proximity, it is also an ambiguous and rather amorphous zone, a porous, ever shifting space in which national allegiances are fluid, indeterminate, and sometimes absent altogether. Indeed, national identity in the novel is almost always a complex and overdetermined phenomenon, rarely reducible to either name, family, language, or country of residence. Thus, although avowedly English in speech and sentiment, many of the inhabitants of the Salus area possess Welsh surnames; Mary Maddocks, although she lives in Wales and is a cousin of Ann's Welsh mother, runs a farm with an English name, speaks English, and tends to look down her nose at her Welsh neighbours; the two rivals for Ann's love, Evan ap Evans and Gabriel Ford, each live on the 'wrong' side of the border: Evans owns a farm near Salus in England while Gabriel has worked for the last fifteen years on Gwen Powys's farm in Wales. Such complexities are cleverly exploited by a bilingual tinker, whose ability to flatter the respective national prejudices of both Gwen Powys and Mary Maddocks not only enables him to steal a 'drench' from the former and proceed to sell it as cough medicine to the latter [CD, 47-8], but also highlights the problems of attempting to adhere in the border region to any exclusive nationalist ideal. An added complication is that of gender, as the following passage illustrates:

Something possesses Gwen Powys to ask Mary and me to take supper at Tan y Bryn, and so that we may have a laugh together afterwards we say we will go. When we get there, we find she has a party of Welsh friends there, and at supper theirs is the tongue

spoken. Mary looks quite pleasant, though at heart she is like Gabriel in thinking it strange that the folk here should prefer their own tongue to English, but Gabriel sits at the bottom of the table glowering on the company.

Gwen has put out her blackberry wine; it sets the men to singing reckless words from 'Men of Harlech,' despite his mutters and angry looks.

One of them jumps up from his place shouting:

'I drink to Wales!'

Gabriel roars:

'And I to England!' and stands facing the other across the table. Megan and Margiad clap their hands; Mary looks serious.

There'll be trouble in a minute, the men are hot as coals,' she whispers.

Gwen purses up her lips.

'I give the border,' she says, very quiet.

We all drink it down, and for once Mary and I have to forgo our laugh. [CD, 60-1]

Gwen's subversive undercutting of male nationalistic fervour is indicative of the extent to which national identity itself is 'gendered' in *Country Dance*. Indeed, all too often nationality seems to be nothing more than the product of, and excuse for, masculine rivalry and machismo, whether in the singing of the stridently militaristic 'Men of Harlech', the intense competition of the Pentredwr sheepdog trials, or the pursuit of Ann's love through appeal to her 'real' nationality ('Cymru

am byth!’ Evan declares after knocking Gabriel out in a fight [*CD*, 67]). The border that Gwen drinks to is thus a border that she, as a woman of the border, feels particularly attuned to, her marginal status within patriarchal discourse also freeing her in part from the exclusivist, patriarchal nationalism that is a formation of this discourse.

The theme of the border is given a much more abject twist in Evans’s second novel, *The Wooden Doctor*, a highly autobiographical work whose principal focus is the unrequited love of a young girl – the novel’s narrator, Arabella – for her family’s middle-aged Irish doctor (the ‘wooden doctor’ of the title), John Flaherty.²¹ To Arabella, Dr Flaherty becomes a substitute father, the authoritative yet doted upon paternal figure – her ‘Father-Confessor’ [*WD*, 57] – who provides her with the security and tender devotion that her own father, an alcoholic, cannot. Although never encouraged by the doctor (who though invariably kind remains ‘wooden’ throughout), Arabella’s feelings intensify as she approaches adulthood, increasingly resembling infatuation in her continual idolisation of the doctor: ‘All that I craved, all the things existence had so far denied in me, I found in him, and in him only’; ‘Against vice, brutality, stupidity, evil, I weighed this one man whose puissant image was the strongest influence in my life, and he more than balanced all’ [*WD*, 4, 57]. What is most striking about Arabella’s love for the doctor, though, and what connects this love to the theme of the abject, is its intimate relationship to the bouts of interstitial cystitis that intensify as Arabella gets older. The ambivalence and complexity of this relationship is neatly summarised in the following observation by Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan:

The progress of her love for him is intertwined with that of her physical illness, for it is her illness alone which enables Arabella, on the narrative level, to call the doctor to her; figuratively the pain of her sick body represents the suffering of her spirit. In that suffering and weakness lies her only power to bring the beloved doctor to her; only as his patient can she see him alone, and she believes that he alone can cure her because she loves him.²²

There is, of course, a tension, even a contradiction, identified here: if Arabella believes that '[the doctor] alone can cure her because she loves him', she also knows that any permanent cure of her condition will destroy the privileged exclusivity of their relationship. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that Arabella's pains are, at least in part, psychosomatic. Certainly, it is as illness and suffering – somatic symptoms of her abjection – that her love for the doctor tends to be figured in the novel.

Ultimately, it is acquaintance with a border county, and indeed with Wales itself, that frees Arabella from this abjection. The importance of her relationship to this border region first emerges during her unhappy time as a pupil teacher at a French boarding school, the Cours Saint-Louis. Forced to relinquish almost all of her personal freedoms and privacy while at the school, Arabella's life is made even more irksome when a mild flirtation with a young Englishman and a request at a local bookshop for Marcelle Tinayre's 'Life of Madame de Pompadour' lead her into conflict with the school's directrice, who regards her conduct as disgracefully

immoral. Reacting to the ‘senseless rigidity’ [*WD*, 59] of the directrice’s discipline – a discipline rooted, of course, in a patriarchal conception of feminine propriety – Arabella not only invokes her beloved ‘wooden doctor’ ([t]he Irishman would not have judged so harshly, nor so cruelly condemned’ [*WD*, 56]), but also the ‘wild freedom’ of her former life in the Herefordshire countryside – a life seemingly outside the normal regulations and constraints of bourgeois civilisation:

I longed for the wild freedom of my home, for the fields, and the woods, and the narrow lanes; for the mad rides by moonlight on the hills when a rabbit hole might mean a broken neck, and the villagers rushed to their windows to peer out at us through a tangle of muslin and geraniums, flying past like noisy phantoms, and infuriated farmers wrote letters to the papers about their young wheat; for Esther’s companionship, she who rode like a centaur, fought like a boy and jeered at everything; for old ragged clothes, shared jokes, books, slipshod ways, and savage quarrels soon forgotten. [*WD*, 60]

Heavily romanticising ‘the wild freedom’ of her border home, Arabella constructs a fantasised image of a life in which the prescribed forms of behaviour normally limiting female freedom are, in the company of her sister, Esther, openly defied and disobeyed. Once more, such ‘freedom’ is presented as almost a condition of the border landscape, part of the moonlit hills whose very existence seems incompatible with the strict, regulatory discipline of Mademoiselle Dessier’s school.

Interestingly, though, it is not her 'home' as such that Arabella refers to as a place of 'wild freedom', but the landscape that surrounds it ('the fields, and the woods, and the narrow lanes'). Indeed, as is made clear in the Prelude to the novel, the *inside* of Arabella's home is a place of horror and abjection:

In our home there was no peace. My father did more than drink occasionally; he was an habitual and incurable drunkard. No word was ever more accurately or deservedly applied; no family was ever rendered more miserable by its justice. . . .

We grew up accepting him at first with terror and disgust, finally with bitter resignation. We have heard our mother called by names that would have shamed a harlot, not below the breath, but as one might sing praises. We have stood shivering behind bolted doors with our hands over our ears that we might not hear him scream of the horrors that he saw, and shut our eyes to those that were not delirious fancy.

Sometimes for our own sake and his own we have wished him dead, drowned, buried, or for ourselves that freedom. . . .

One and all, year in, year out, as we grew up or old, we nursed the prospect of escape. We quarrelled among ourselves; fretted, isolated by our eccentricities, we sharpened our claws in one another's flesh. Our home among the quiet fields became a cage of savagery. [*WD*, xvi, xviii]

In contrast to the landscape that surrounds it (to which, of course, she could escape), Arabella figures her home in terms of entrapment, as a place of 'bolted doors' and stifled senses; moreover, the word 'savage', which in the Cours Saint-Louis portrait possessed connotations of liberty and vitality, is now transposed into an image of frenzied confinement: 'a cage of savagery.' Most significantly, though, Arabella portrays her home in terms similar to those used in her description of the Cours Saint-Louis. While her hatred for the school is reflected in the grotesque imagery used to describe the women who run it – the school institutrices who huddle 'like birds on a perch', tearing at the air 'as though theirs were not hands but claws' [*WD*, 21], and the directrice herself, implicitly likened to the 'distended yellow eyes' and 'unsheathed curving claws' of Madame Baschet's cat [*WD*, 12] – here it is Arabella herself that becomes 'clawed' and savage: 'we sharpened our claws in one another's flesh'.

Such parallels are later developed via the metaphor of a canary cage hung by Arabella from a quince tree in the garden: 'I saw the sky through the bars of his cage, and the sunshine through the leaves' [*WD*, 76] – an image which implies, as Moira Dearnley remarks, that Arabella 'shares a cage with the clawed females of the novel'.²³ Significantly, it is on the same day that Arabella's own body is transformed into a 'fleshy cage' [*WD*, 92] by the agonising pain of cystitis, which she likens to a fox tearing at her inside in its desire to escape:

In the night the pain came back. It was like a fox in a bag
scratching and rending to get out. My spirits trailed in the dust. The

claws penetrated my sleep, dragged me awake and I sat up in my bed. I knew that I was ill. [*WD*, 77-8]

Further metaphorical reference to her pain as a fox tearing at her from the inside proliferates throughout the text:

I insisted upon getting up. I would not abase my existence before the fox that had entered into my body. . . .

We were laughing. Suddenly out of the darkness the fox sprang with flaming feet and famished jaws, rending, biting, tearing. I wished that I could faint and be delivered from this agony, but my strength increased with the torture. [*WD*, 79-80]

Mr. Maitlands asked me all the questions that the Wooden Doctor had put: over old and trodden ground he tried to trace the fox's track, now almost obliterated. . . .

Wrapped in a long shawl, I walked to the operating theatre, and stretched on the table . . . was subjected to another examination

It was quite bearable unless the instruments actually touched the fox's stronghold. Then furiously it scratched and bit. [*WD*, 84]

The image of the fox parallels (and internalises) Arabella's own feeling of being constrained, her sense that she too is a trapped animal fighting furiously to escape. In hospital, she describes with a mixture of fear and admiration a young woman

'like a handsome, half-tamed bird, willing to warm itself, but ready to bite any hand that might meddle with it' [*WD*, 98]. Such images, however, also highlight the impossibility of escape. Indeed, after being admitted to hospital, Arabella becomes increasingly convinced that there is no permanent way out of her 'invalid's cage' [*WD*, 83]; the path of human mortality in the twentieth century, she argues, leads inexorably towards 'the repulsive stink of methether': '[W]hatever our lives and wherever they might lead us, however freely we have trodden, tossing our heads to the clouds, here, said the twentieth century, we must end, here the bogey will finally catch us, tip us into his black bag and away.' Implicitly contrasting freedom and imprisonment, the natural and the modern, Arabella seems to equate modernity itself with institutional incarceration: ' "No, you may imagine you're 'free,' " I told myself mournfully, "but sooner or later some institution will get hold of you" ' [*WD*, 95].

There is also, of course, a sexual dimension to the fox image, as is suggested initially by the events surrounding the onset of Arabella's cystitis. Four years prior to her illness, Arabella relates how excited she was, at the age of seventeen, to discover among her father's old magazines 'an article on Aubrey Beardsley, illustrated with a few of his more notorious drawings':

I was pierced by delight, my imagination leapt.

Those ordered fantasies, those formal visions, these fairy things cased in whalebone, queer figures in cold blood cast from white-hot fancy . . . this curbed riot, this damned river, how it bore me away! [*WD*, 75]

While the exact nature of these pictures is never made explicit,²⁴ it seems clear from Arabella's language that what excites her is their sexual intensification of the body through convention, order, and formality, in short, through that which ostensibly opposes bodily desire – a potential paradox that is vividly expressed through the use of oxymora: 'ordered fantasies', 'formal visions', 'cold blood . . . white-hot fancy', 'curbed riot', 'damned river'. Inspired to start drawing herself, Arabella seems to find in Beardsley's example a means of expressing (and thus sublimating) her own sexual desires; only after completing her first artistic commission and being temporarily denied such an outlet does her cystitis begin. As Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan notes, the pain that Arabella then suffers becomes a metaphor for her own troubled sexuality: 'the recurring image of the fox, the suffering and fever relieved only by the Irish doctor, and even the pain she feels as he examines her, become overt sexual metaphors, metaphors of her struggle with her developing sexual nature'.²⁵ Crucially, these metaphors are bodily metaphors: the pain of Arabella's illness, its effect of rendering (in Barbara Prys-Williams's words) 'any genital engagement problematic',²⁶ locates at the level of physical symptom Arabella's refusal to renounce her love for the Irish doctor; it quite literally inscribes upon her body the absolute impossibility of such a betrayal.

Nevertheless, towards the end of *The Wooden Doctor*, Arabella does seem (for a while at least) to leave behind both doctor and cystitis, for during a stay in Caernarfonshire she meets and agrees to marry a young Englishman called Oliver. That it is Wales which provides the backdrop for this love affair is far from incidental, Arabella's feelings for Oliver being partly shaped, I would argue, by her

growing identification with the country and its landscape. Acting as a catalyst for this process is the Nonconformist preacher, Griff Davies, whom Arabella meets at Bodgynan (the farm at which she is staying) one Sunday evening. Following an intense conversation in which each arouses the interest of the other, they both listen to Davies's daughter, Blodwyn [sic], sing – an event that reminds the Welsh minister of his own childhood on the slopes of Snowdonia:

When I was a boy I used to climb Snowdon and look down into
Nature's very heart. If there were a storm at night I left my father's
roof and ran among the desolate rocks in the pouring rain and
darkness to see the lightning play below me . . . the clouds dissolved
on Eryori [sic], and the heavenly fire descended. . . . I thought of
those nights when you sang, Blodwyn, and my blood ran quicker.
[WD, 184]

While on the one hand bearing comparison with the invocations of childhood and nature in 'To my sister Sian' and 'The Immortal Hospital', the merging of self with landscape remembered by Davies invokes not the countryside of the border but that of Wales's symbolic heartland. Again, though, it is as a condition of landscape – and even landscape itself – that identity is presented, the passage drawing an implicit connection between the minister's impassioned nature (and, by extension, the passionate nature of the Welsh as a whole) and the tumultuous weather of his mountain home. The interconnections between Welsh landscape and identity are further developed in Arabella's response to Blodwyn's singing, which locates both within the same metaphor of nation-as-body: 'as a bardic spirit of the days when

her song was new she seemed; the torrents' rushing rung in her childish voice, the breath of old Wales lay on her lips, its heart beat furiously in her breast' [*WD*, 183]. The metaphor is far from inappropriate: as the images of pumping blood in both passages suggest ('my blood ran quicker', '[old Wales's] heart beat furiously in her breast'), the experience of sublime union with this Welsh landscape provokes a strong somatic response – one, moreover, that possesses a potentially erotic charge. It is noticeable, for instance, how Arabella's conversation with Griff Davies awakens in her suppressed passions and desires, stirring her, almost against her will, from her habitual torpor: 'Suddenly I was frightened, frightened of the emotion that was rising in me, coming to life again with dreadful pangs. I was waking!' [*WD*, 187].

It is this new sense of vitality – a sense of having escaped from her 'cage' – that Arabella transposes into her relationship with Oliver Austen. On the night that they first declare their love for each other, however, it is Arabella's own internal 'beast' that is released from its 'cage'. After swinging the Lloyd-Owen girls into the bacon rack in the kitchen, Oliver then threatens to do the same to Arabella:

I did what I thought to be outrageous even then: with a ferocious snap I bit Oliver's hand.

He hoisted me into the rack, uttering a ferocious oath beneath his breath. I was not ashamed then, but I felt terribly sick. Blood dripped on the floor. [*WD*, 205]

The event precipitates mutual declarations of love; once released, the energies of Arabella's 'beast' are quickly channelled into sexual desire. The novel ends ambiguously, however: Arabella's cystitis returns once they are apart, and their plans to marry collapse completely when she returns to Salus and sees the Wooden Doctor again. Ending with a few short matter-of-fact lines, the novel resists any form of conventional closure, refusing to resolve the final status of Arabella's love and illness:

All this took place some time ago.

My book was published.

Oliver sends me red tulips on my birthday.

And the Irishman married a young girl a few months after
my return.

* * * * *

And that's the end. [*WD*, 220]

While Arabella has undoubtedly progressed from her earlier abject state, she still, it seems, has some way to travel before she can escape her obsessional passion for the 'wooden doctor'. In which direction this will be, however (a return to Wales?, a rekindling of her affair with Oliver?), the novel refuses to disclose.

Escaping the Self: *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl*

Similar themes of social and familial dysfunction, violence, alcoholism, and obsessional love, are to be found in Rachel Trezise's debut novel, *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl*. Set against a backdrop of social and economic deprivation, Trezise's autobiographical novel explores the impact of childhood abuse and neglect upon the life of a young girl (the thinly-disguised narrative persona of Rebecca Trigianni) growing up in the Rhondda Valley during the 1980s and '90s. Although the protagonist of a very different story to that of Arabella, it is interesting to note (as the 'goldfish bowl' of the title suggests) that the dominant theme of Rebecca's narrative is also one of confinement – indeed, like Arabella, Rebecca feels trapped for much of her narrative in a state that can only be described as abject.

As with Arabella, Rebecca's unhappy childhood home is pivotal to the subsequent development of her personality. While initially it is the normality of her family that Rebecca stresses – 'Each aspect of our family life was healthy and happy. A Mam, a Dad, a big brother, two cats, a dog and a goldfish' [*IOGB*, 21] – the closure of the pit in which her stepfather works initiates a spiralling circle of violence, alcoholism and infidelity that will eventually culminate in the disintegration of this stable family unit:

Dad was becoming the enemy my father had once been. The bruises, the tears and the nights in the car were exactly the same but I wasn't. This time I was seven years older and I had the discomfort

of understanding it all. I had a first-class seat for the showing of a dysfunctional marriage. I saw my mother with another man. I saw my father drink until he couldn't keep it down. I saw the broken plates and the warm blood stain the carpet and heard my mother's head beat against the wall, time after time. Dull thumping over and over as she blacked out to the thrum tee thrum, thrum tee thrum of her head, my heart thrum tee thrummed with a black beating of anger which I had no means of expressing or using. [*IOGB*, 35]

At the age of eleven, Rebecca's life enters a new, more horrifying phase when, in the first of many such incidents, she is raped by her stepfather: an event, she recalls, that 'broke my hymen and my senses alike' [*IOGB*, 36]. Indeed, as is emphasised by the image of a 'glass coffin', Rebecca's response to this violation is one of withdrawal and non-communication:

There was no life after rape. Trust and the word 'trust' jumped out of my vocabulary and exploded in a suffocating lack of air, landed in a gathering of rose petals before my feet.

I acquired two phobias that evening, the fear of open doors and a fear of people. All people.

Life seemed to be a process of ripping children out of themselves. I chose to exclude myself from this practice. Somehow I ended up in a glass coffin. A dwelling where I could see and hear life going on around me, but where participating would not be possible. [*IOGB*, 37]

To Rebecca, her rape is not only a personal betrayal, but a betrayal by life in general. No longer able to 'trust', she responds by 'deadening' her senses, retreating into a 'glass coffin' from which life can be viewed without the risks of participation.

However, what begins as a defense mechanism – a complete sealing off of the self from that which might potentially threaten it – initiates an extremely debilitating and damaging process: locked in her 'coffin', Rebecca is effectively condemned to a life of abjection. Indeed, Rebecca's account of her mother's decision to abandon her abusive husband is emphatic in its refusal to regard this decision in terms of an 'escape'. As Rebecca attempts to follow her mother and walk away from the childhood home in which she had repeatedly been abused, she becomes intensely aware that she will never leave this home behind:

A pain struck my neck and the more I tried to push the lid away, the more my weakness pulled me back. My step-father held my hair so tightly I believed my neck was breaking. And I'd rather it break than be pulled back in. I stumbled away and hanging onto the ledge of the step I saw his hand with my hair inside it. My mother snatched at me, and James's girlfriend closed the door on my brother holding my step-father's throat.

Words and hurt is all I could feel. 'Freedom. This. Going. Get. Safe.' Everything is hurting me. 'Only way.' 'Safe.'

No, I have not escaped. [*IOGB*, 45]

Beginning by associating the 'lid' of her 'coffin' with her stepfather's restraining hand, Rebecca then proceeds to acknowledge that, as far as her sense of identity is concerned, she has never escaped this hand. However much physical distance she puts between herself and her stepfather, his 'hand' – that is, the 'lid' of her 'coffin' – continues to press down upon her.

Rebecca's own personal sense of inhabiting a coffin acquires a new, social dimension after she moves with her mother to Penrhys, a run-down, mountain-top estate rumoured to have been constructed on the site of a Roman burial ground. The clear implication of this continuing death imagery is that Penrhys is a burial site not just for Roman soldiers but a whole social underclass that society would rather not deal with: 'Surrounded by forest and a two-mile stretch from civilization, the police avoided Penrhys because it made their lives safe and generally less stressful. It was prison for the innocent and a haven for the criminal' [*IOGB*, 46]. The narrator's own imprisoned sense of self is thus reflected on a wider social level: the neighbour 'kicked to death in his garden' ('I kept on walking, thinking I knew enough dead souls already') and the continual sound of 'smashing in the distance' ('Why wouldn't someone shatter my glass?'). Images of circular motion (like a goldfish in a bowl?) litter Rebecca's narrative at this point, echoing her sense of physical and mental confinement: 'Around and around the bedroom in circles, circles, circles' [*IOGB*, 47] and the description of her secret night runs with her terminally ill dog, Bella: 'At nine I took her to a field and ran in circles, circles, circles with her. I cried, returning at eleven' [*IOGB*, 48].

At the age of fourteen, Rebecca tries to escape her coffin/goldfish bowl by running away to Nottingham with an older boyfriend. The futility of this venture does not take long to strike her: 'I just wanted to be free from air-tight walls, but what actually happened was the opposite. The walls got tighter'; 'I had escaped from one tank of repression only by climbing into someone else's' [*IOGB*, 52, 54]. Significantly, though, Rebecca's experience of life in an English city alters her perception of her native Rhondda, highlighting for her the narrowness and insularity of the valley she was born and brought up in. On returning to the Rhondda (in the back of a police car), Rebecca notes with hostility a 'Welcome to the Rhondda' board: 'I'm sure the police driver slowed passing it, to prolong my displeasure' [*IOGB*, 55]. As she gets older, this hostility towards the Rhondda – a sense that it is the valley itself which is imprisoning her – acquires the status of a personal credo:

I was ashamed suddenly to be someone who sings 'We'll keep a welcome in the hillsides' and then burns down the home of the one we welcomed. I was ashamed to be a troglodyte, a mindless cave-woman wearing blinkers. A sheep who votes Labour because my grandparents did. An ant who follows its tribe around in the dark, under the stone, oblivious to any sort of life outside. . . .

I began to look at the place of my birth, growth and youth, with double vision, one which looked down from above and saw through everyone and everything because I knew I could be bigger, and another at eye level which accepted these common, common people because I was afraid it was all I would ever be. [*IOGB*, 67-8]

What is noticeable from the beginning of this passage, however, is the extent to which Rebecca's hostility towards the Rhondda is also directed inwards, against herself: she is, she says, both 'ashamed' to be the person that she is and 'afraid' that it is all she will ever be. There is a sense, in fact, in which the Rhondda acts as the societal counterpart of her imprisoned self, enabling her to project outwards a hatred for her own defensively insular personality. Indeed, the 'double vision' that Rebecca notes is symptomatic of this ambivalence, constituting an almost conscious acknowledgement that in rejecting the 'goldfish bowl' of the Rhondda she is equally rejecting her own 'goldfish bowl' self.

It is a relationship with a boy called Daf that, for a while at least, enables Rebecca to escape this self. The description of their first sexual encounter suggests an experience almost sublime in its power and scope: 'Someone turned that stupid goldfish bowl upside down and shook it so hard I rolled around and around until I was dizzy to the point of delighted beyond measure and then I fell out and floated like a feather in a breeze, down, down, down, small and beautiful and landed in Daf's arms, naked and pretty and shaking with pleasure' [*IOGB*, 72-3]. Indeed, to Rebecca this is a moment of rebirth, one that returns her to a time before innocence was shattered: 'I'm born, I'm a baby here. This is the start, the beginning of my life, and Daf will look after me forever' [*IOGB*, 73]. There is a dark side to this euphoric tone, however, a foreshadowing of the impossible demands that Rebecca will later place upon Daf. Moreover, there is also a suggestion – particularly in her ferocious jealousy of Daf's mother – that Rebecca's sense of identity has been subsumed entirely by her sexual relationship with Daf:

I am wholly, completely, totally, and utterly, couldn't be more, obsessed with Daf. I am consumed by nothing but his person I think about him constantly and I mean, constantly. Even when I am with him. When he is in the same room, when we are having sex, I am thinking about him and getting closer to him, when he is inside me I want to get closer. He sleeps inside me because I think if he leaves my body I will lose him. . . .

I hate his mother because she has known him longer than I have. I hate thinking about him once being attached to her by an umbilical cord. I throw up thinking he could have been inside her stomach. I want to be his mother. I want to be everything female to him. [*IOGB*, 77]

In a fantasy of displacement, Rebecca abjects the corporeal link that once connected Daf to his mother ('I throw up thinking he could have been inside her . . .') in order to become herself 'his mother'. Doting on him and afraid of losing him, she dreams of incorporating him within her 'maternal' body: 'He sleeps inside me because I think if he leaves my body I will lose him.'

When Daf is not around, Rebecca finds it increasingly difficult to cope; she is reminded of 'when I used to play dead to stay alive, but now it's inside out; now I'm dressing up and socialising the rotten carcass just to make it look alive' [*IOGB*, 93]. After breaking up with Daf she starts to self-harm, cutting her thighs with a razor blade while taking a bath:

Self punishment didn't hurt, didn't sting; it felt like relief, like confession. There was blood everywhere, which I was sure hadn't come from me. Had I done it to hurt myself or to prove I was still alive? Whatever the reason it resulted in neither. I continued to mutilate, but when the blade got blunt I knew my suffering had in no way started. [*IOGB*, 96]

For Rebecca, cutting herself becomes a substitute for speech (what she describes here as 'confession'), a way of releasing the abject. On a continuum with this behaviour is her self-destructive consumption of drink and drugs, combined with the complete abandonment of sexual ownership of her body:

A little different to a razor blade, this punishment worked. Total, utter messing yourself stupid, creating a reputation, a frighteningly dangerous façade, which is worse than how you started out drinking in the first place, just hoping that other people will start to hate you as much as you do yourself. Now, this 'is' self mutilation. [*IOGB*, 99]

Surprisingly, though, at the bleakest moment of Rebecca's narrative, this vicious circle of despair and self-destruction is broken (or at least reversed) by the experience of caring for her dying grandmother, a figure who, up until now, has been almost entirely absent from her narrative. Listening to her grandmother's stories of hardship and endurance forces Rebecca to confront the sense of

meaninglessness in her own existence. Although, initially, guilt leads Rebecca to try and kill herself with a 'paracetamol soup', this suicide attempt is itself transformed into a symbolic moment of death and rebirth ('I really did die' [*IOGB*, 117]), one that promises to be of more lasting duration than that of her sexual anniversary with Daf.

It is worth concluding this final chapter with the closing lines of Trezise's novel, emphasising as these do the strength that Rebecca is able to derive from the hardships and triumphs of a past generation of women:

My Gran died the following Tuesday . . . yet she gave me more than a choice of clothes and a sewing machine, she gave me the person who is writing this sentence. She gave me treasured stories and examples and standards to live by, reasons to fight my way to where I want to go. Reasons to get up in the morning and make the day a success. She gave me a reason to think myself a good, worthy person, if only I do half as much as she did with her life. She equipped me with everything I would need to begin a new forceful life of my own making. The strongest woman I have ever known handed out to me her gift-wrapped strength. [*IOGB*, 118]

Her grandmother's 'gift-wrapped strength' is nothing less than the yet to be written history of female endurance and the values which it has sustained. It is knowledge of this history, it might be argued, that eventually provides Rebecca with the strength to stand up and assert her identity – to view her body as something other

than the abject 'coffin' which personal experience and cultural understanding have taught her to perceive.

¹ Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*, pp. 88, 93, 88-9.

² Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity', in *Modern Literary Theory*, p. 136.

³ Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*, p. 93.

⁴ Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity', in *Modern Literary Theory*, p. 136.

⁵ For a similar point, see both Toril Moi's reading of Virginia Woolf in the light of Kristevan theory and her more detailed elucidation of Kristeva's ideas in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* [1985] (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 12, 165.

⁶ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 165. The works Moi refers to are The Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, 'Women's writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*', *Ideology and Consciousness*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1978), p. 30, and Beverly Brown and Parveen Adams, 'The feminine body and feminist politics', *m/f*, No. 3 (1979), p. 40.

⁷ Aaron, 'Finding a voice in two tongues', in *Our Sisters' Land*, p. 188. Nineteenth century Welsh women's identity is given more extended treatment in Jane Aaron, *Pur fel y Dur: Y Gymraes yn Llên Menywod y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1998).

⁸ Aaron, 'Finding a voice in two tongues', in *Our Sisters' Land*, p. 189. The 'Welsh novel' that Aaron cites is Mari Puw Rowlands's *Y Deryn Diarth* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1966).

⁹ Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-century Welsh Autobiography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 34.

¹⁰ See, for example, Edward Said's characterising of the 'Orient' in Western discourse as 'a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe . . . a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden' (Edward D. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 190).

¹¹ For the biographical details that follow (and a considerably more detailed account of Margiad Evans's life), see Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, Border Lines Series (Bridgend: Seren, 1998).

¹² Margiad Evans, 'The Immortal Hospital' (unpublished). Quoted in Moira Dearnley, *Margiad Evans*, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹³ From May 1950 Evans began to suffer from epileptic fits, her condition gradually worsening until in February 1956 she was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. She died just over two years later on her forty-ninth birthday. For these final years, see Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, pp. 117-39.

¹⁴ Margiad Evans, 'To my sister Sian', in Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan (eds.), *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2003), p. 183.

¹⁵ Letter to Gwyn Jones (6 March, 1946). Quoted in Dearnley, *Margiad Evans*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Margiad Evans, *Autobiography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1943), p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48. See also Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, pp. 84-5.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'La femme, ce n'est jamais ça', *Tel Quel*, No. 59 (Automne 1974), p. 21. Quoted in Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 163.

¹⁹ Evans, *Autobiography*, p. 13. Evans contrasts such 'tortured symbolism' (possibly alluding to Keats's notion of the 'egotistical sublime'?) with her own 'simple and ever open sight of love'. I find no evidence that she was herself aware of any gender implications to this statement.

²⁰ In her novel *Creed*, Evans describes the process of writing as 'translating what I have learned into scribbled words on thin paper' (Margiad Evans, *Creed* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), p. 1).

²¹ For the novel's close but often undecidable relationship with events in Evans's own life, see Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, pp. 34-7.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

²³ Dearnley, *Margiad Evans*, p. 16.

²⁴ Given the nature of Arabella's unrequited love for the Irish doctor, it is surely not too speculative to imagine, however, that the drawings which she discovers include some of those produced by Beardsley for Wilde's *Salome* – illustrations for a text in which, as Barbara Prys-Williams has commented, 'Wilde has depicted Salome using her enormous sexual power over her stepfather, Herod' (Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-century Autobiography*, p. 13).

²⁵ Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, p.38.

²⁶ Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-century Autobiography*, p. 40.

Conclusion

Through a combination of psychoanalytic and materialist approaches, the primary aim of this thesis has been to analyse the role of the body in the construction and contestation of identity in Wales at a cultural as well as an individual level. Placing psychoanalytic postulates within the context of more culturally and historically aware accounts of Welsh literary practice, I have sought to offer a new and alternative perspective on the construction of Welsh cultural identities from the past to the present day.

The bedrock of my analysis of the body has been Kristeva's concept of abjection and its correlate the abject. Locating Kristeva's psychoanalytic take on the body alongside the more historical and culturally orientated accounts of Bakhtin, Foucault and Bhabha, I concluded that although Kristeva's account went some way towards exploring the role of abjection in social and cultural practice, her depiction of the abject remained susceptible to the charge of presenting a 'normalising' account of subjectivity. While abjection provided a useful model upon which to further our understanding of identity and its construction, I argued that an historically orientated account of the body was required that enabled its cultural determinants to be identified and analysed more thoroughly.

Through a discussion of the 1847 Blue Books *Report . . . into the State of Education in Wales* I attempted to provide just such an analysis. Locating my discussion of the body within a specific socio-historical context, I demonstrated that the Report's condemnation of the Welsh working class as immoral was rooted

in that class's failure to conform to bourgeois codes of bodily behaviour and restraint. Noting that the 'Treason of the Blue Books' became a rallying cry for Wales's late nineteenth-century national revival, I concluded nevertheless that the dominant values of this revival reflected the ideological assumptions of the Report itself, its particular investment in the body as morally, nationally and socially significant. The construction of a modern Welsh identity, I argued, entailed the abjection by Wales's 'Nonconformist Nation' of a number of social practices and customs hitherto regarded as intrinsically Welsh.

Through Caradoc Evans's collection of short stories, *My People*, I explored the growing hostility during the early twentieth century towards the cultural hegemony of Welsh Nonconformity. Within the fictional setting of Manteg, I noted how Evans constructed his own anti-myth to the cultured, rural *gwerin*: a bestial, carnally-minded peasantry ruled over by a grasping, Nonconformist priesthood. Far from being 'anti-Welsh', I argued that Evans's adoption of the grotesque as a weapon of attack was indicative of his 'inner' positioning within Nonconformist culture. Not only was Evans implicated in the same discursive/ideological structures he was attempting to reject, his depiction of Nonconformity as bestial and corrupt reinforced the same categories of disgust and disavowal against which Nonconformist identity had itself been established.

Noting the extent to which Caradoc Evans has been regarded as the 'father' of Welsh writing in English, I argued that criticism of the work of its best known son, Dylan Thomas, continues to regard it as a young, 'immature' literature. Much critical writing on Dylan Thomas, I noted, often displaces or abjects onto the

category of the immature that which is perceived as a threat to the stability and integrity of the normative adult self. Such accusations of personal immaturity tend to be embedded within a broader discursive framework in which Welsh writing *per se* has been condemned as childishly irresponsible. Rejecting such a perspective, I argued that concepts of the childish and the immature are bourgeois constructs deployed to legitimise 'normal' adult behaviour. It is those who transgress such behaviour – the working class, the colonised, the sexually deviant – who are often deemed to be irresponsible and childlike. Thomas's early poetry is regarded as particularly threatening by the metropolitan centre because its playful foregrounding of language's materiality destabilises the social contract between signifier and signified. It is Thomas's threatening alterity, I concluded, that has helped to cement his reputation for immaturity.

Many Welsh-language critics have imaged Wales's Anglophone culture in terms of the abject body; as injury, wound, decay and corruption. In the post-war decades, I argued, such attitudes were internalised by a number of influential poets writing in English, most notably R. S. Thomas. Thomas's nationalist poetry of the 1960s and '70s, I noted, registers his despair at the erosion of Welsh-language culture by imaging the anglicisation of Wales in terms of decay, mutilation and corruption. In a number of poems, Thomas turns such imagery against himself: as an Anglo-Welsh poet, he acknowledges with considerable bitterness that he is himself part of the 'abject' culture he is striving to reject.

In a reading of Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village* and Niall Griffiths's *Grits*, I argued that the heteroglossic proliferation of language in south

Wales during the early twentieth century anticipated in its effects more general developments in contemporary Western culture, most notably the destabilising of traditional explanatory narratives by the clash of incompatible linguistic registers and discourses. While acknowledging differences of emphasis in the two novels, I concluded that in both an uneasy mix of liberated exhilaration and nihilistic terror at this collapse of authoritative meaning was registered via representations of the body as grotesque and abject.

Returning to the cultural legacy of the 1847 Report, I traced the process by which the 'purity' of the female body became a metonym for wider social and moral concerns within Wales, the means by which cultural and national integrity might be evaluated and judged. For the English-born Margiad Evans, I argued, this cultural legacy was of little concern: to her, Wales represented freedom from the constraints and restrictions of bourgeois English society. For Rachel Trezise, on the other hand, it is Rhondda society that is narrow and oppressive; England that, for a while at least, seems to offer escape. Both novels, I concluded, illustrate the difficulties faced by women of establishing a coherent sense of self and identity within a society that continues to code the female body as abject.

All the chapters in this study have stressed the importance of the body to any discussion of identity in Wales. Indeed, as I have argued, it is representations of the body that have underpinned dominant constructions of Welshness from the time of the Blue Books Report. Moreover, it is also via the body that such constructions of Welsh identity have been resisted and contested. As the privileged locus and coder of national debates within Wales, it is the body and its

representation that have had some of the most profound effects upon the everyday lives of ordinary Welsh people.

Bibliography

Aaron, Jane, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

Aaron, Jane, 'Finding a voice in two tongues: gender and colonization', in Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (eds.), *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), pp. 183-98

Aaron, Jane, *Pur fel y Dur: Y Gymraes yn Llên Menywod y Bedaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1998)

Adamson, David L., *Class, Ideology and the Nation: A Theory of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991)

Ariés, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* [1960], trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962)

Baker, Simon, 'Caradoc Evans's "A Father in Sion" and Contemporary Critical Theory', *New Welsh Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [11] (Winter 1990-91), pp. 46-50

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 'Discourse in the Novel' [1934-35], in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky [1968] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984)

Baldick, Chris, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)

Bersani, Leo, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in D. Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197-222

Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Bianchi, Tony, 'R.S. Thomas and His Readers', in Tony Curtis (ed.), *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Studies in Cultural and National Identity* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), pp. 69-95

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

Brown, Beverly, and Parveen Adams, 'The feminine body and feminist politics', *m/f*, No. 3 (1979), pp. 35-50

Brown, Tony, '“Eve’s Ruse”: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, Vol. 49, No. 195 (Autumn 2000), pp. 229-50

Brown Tony, 'Shock, strangeness, wonder: Glyn Jones and the art of fiction', *New Welsh Review*, No. 23 (Winter 1993-94), pp. 43-53

Burgin, Victor, 'Geometry and Abjection', in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 104-23

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Carroll, Robert and Stephen Prickett (eds.), *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: OUP, 1997)

Césaire, Aime, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1955] (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972)

Colley, Linda, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

Connor, Stephen, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

Conran, Anthony, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982)

Conran, Tony, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997)

Constantine, L. L. and Floyd M. Martinson (eds.), *Children and Sex: New Findings, New Perspectives* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981)

Corcoran, Neil, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993)

Coveney, Peter, *The Image of Childhood; The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* [1957], rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967)

Crawford, Robert, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993)

Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Crehan, Stuart, 'The Lips of Time', in Alan Bold (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* (London: Vision Press, 1990), pp. 35-64

Davies, Aneurin Talfan, 'A Question of Language', *Welsh Anvil* V (1953), pp. 19-

Davies, Grahame, 'Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Vol. 7 (2001-02), pp. 50-77

Davies, Grahame, *Sefyll yn y Bwlch; Cymru a'r mudiad gwrth-fodern: R. S. Thomas, Saunders Lewis, T. S. Eliot a Simone Weil* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1999)

Davies, Idris, *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997)

Davies, Norman, *The Isles: A History* (London: Macmillan, 1999)

Davies, Walford, *Dylan Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986)

Dearnley, Moira, *Margiad Evans*, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982)

Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976)

Dollimore, Jonathan, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* [1998] (London: Penguin, 1999)

Dollimore, Jonathan, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

Ellman, Maud, 'Eliot's Abjection', in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 178-200

Evans, Caradoc, *My People* [1915], ed. John Harris (Bridgend: Seren, 1987)

Evans, Gwynfor, *Land of my Fathers* [1974] (Swansea: Y Lolfa, 1992)

Evans, Margiad, *Autobiography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1943)

Evans, Margiad, *Country Dance* [1932] (London: John Calder, 1978)

Evans, Margiad, *Creed* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936)

Evans, Margiad, *The Wooden Doctor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1933)

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. Charles Lam Markmann [1967] (London: Paladin, 1970)

Foster, Hal, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996)

Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977)

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley [1978] (London: Penguin, 1990)

Garlick, Raymond, and Roland Mathias (eds.), *Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1990* (Bridgend: Seren, 1992)

Goodby, John and Christopher Wigginton, '“Shut, too in a tower of words”: Dylan Thomas' modernism', in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (eds.), *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 89-112

Goodby, John and Chris Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, New Casebooks Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001)

Gordon, Jan B., 'Decadent Spaces: Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de siècle*', in Ian Fletcher (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890's* (London: Arnold, 1979), pp. 31-58

Gorham, Deborah, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982)

Gramich, Katie, ' "Daughters of Darkness": Dylan Thomas and the Celebration of the Female', in John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, New Casebooks Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 65-84

Gramich, Katie, 'Welsh Greats of the Century: No. 1. Poets', *New Welsh Review*, No. 40 (Spring 1998), pp. 9-12

Gramich, Katie and Catherine Brennan (eds.), *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001: An Anthology* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2003)

Griffiths, Bruce, *Saunders Lewis*, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989)

Griffiths, Niall, *Grits* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000)

Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001)

Gross, Elizabeth, 'The Body of Signification', in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 80-103

Harris, John, 'A Long Low Sigh Across the Waters: The First Translations of Kate Roberts', *Planet*, No.87 (1991), pp. 21-9

Holbrook, David, *Dylan Thomas and Poetic Dissociation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964)

Holbrook, David, *Dylan Thomas: The Code of Night* (London: Athlone Press, 1972)

Holbrook, David, *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1962)

Jones, Alun R. and Gwyn Thomas (eds.), *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983)

Jones, Bobi, 'Anglo-Welsh: More Definition', *Planet*, No. 16 (Feb/March 1973), pp. 11-23

Jones, David, *Before Rebecca: Popular Protest in Wales 1793-1835* (London: Allen Lane, 1975)

Jones, David J. V., *The Last Rising: The Newport Chartist Insurrection of 1839* [1985] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999)

Jones, Glyn, *Goodbye, What Were You?* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994)

Jones, Glyn, *The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996)

Jones, Glyn, *The Collected Stories of Glyn Jones*, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999)

Jones, Glyn, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* [1968], revised ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001)

Jones, Glyn, *The Valley, The City, The Village* (London: Dent, 1956)

Jones, Gwyn and Thomas Jones (eds.), *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Dent, 1949)

Jones, Gwyn, *Background to Dylan Thomas and Other Explorations* (Oxford: OUP, 1992)

Jones, Gwyn, 'Caradoc was the daddy of us all', *The Western Mail* (20 Aug 1960), p. 5

Jones, Ieuan Gwynedd, *Mid-Victorian Wales: The Observers and the Observed* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992)

Jones, Mary, 'A Changing Myth: The Projection of the Welsh in the Short Stories of Caradoc Evans', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, No. 81 (1985), pp. 90-6

Kincaid, James R., *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Kristeva, Julia, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview' [1986], in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edn. (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 131-7

Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora, and Leon Roudiez [1980] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982)

Kristeva, Julia, 'La femme, ce n'est jamais ça', *Tel Quel*, No. 59 (Automne 1974), pp. 19-24

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Kristeva, Julia, *Tales of Love* [1983], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987)

Laqueur, Thomas, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003)

Lewinsohn, Richard, *A History of Sexual Customs*, trans. Alexander Mayce (New York: Bell, 1958)

Lewis, Alun, *Collected Poems*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 1994)

Lewis, Saunders, '*Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?*' (Caerdydd: Urdd Graddedigion Prifysgol Cymru Cangen Caerdydd, 1939)

Lingen, Ralph Robert Wheeler, Jelinger Cookson Symons, and Henry Vaughan Johnson, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales . . . In Three Parts. Part I, Carmarthen, Glamorgan and Pembroke. Part II, Brecknock, Cardigan, Radnor and Monmouth. Part III, North Wales* (London, 1847)

Lloyd, D. Tecwyn, 'Cymru yn Saesneg', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1966), pp. 257-80

Lloyd-Morgan, Ceridwen, *Margiad Evans*, Border Lines Series (Bridgend: Seren, 1998)

McCarthy, Cormac, *Suttree* (London: Picador, 1989)

Marcus, Steven, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966)

Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, 'Women's writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*', *Ideology and Consciousness*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 27-48

Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* [1667] (London: Penguin, 1996)

Moi, Toril, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* [1985] (London: Routledge, 1990)

Molloy, Pat, *And They Blessed Rebecca* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1983)

Morgan, Derec Llwyd, *The Great Awakening in Wales* [1981], trans. Dyfnallt Morgan (London: Epworth Press, 1988)

Morgan, Kenneth O., *Wales in British Politics, 1868-1922* [1963] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991)

Morgan, Prys, 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', in R. R. Davies et. al. (eds.), *Welsh Society and Nationhood: Historical Essays Presented to Glanmor Williams* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1984), pp. 199-215

Murray, Nicholas, 'Mr Evans, Mr Rushdie and the White Settlers', *New Welsh Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [11] (Winter 1990-91), pp. 51-2

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* [1874], in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Pentony, Samantha, 'How Kristeva's theory of abjection works in relation to the fairy tale and post colonial novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*', *Deep South*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring 1996), <http://www.otago.ac.nz/DeepSouth/vol2no3/pentony.html>

Pollock, Linda, *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children Over Three Centuries* (Hanover, NH & London: University Press of New England, 1987)

Prys-Williams, Barbara, *Twentieth-century Welsh Autobiography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004)

Raine, Allen, *Queen of the Rushes: A Tale of the Welsh Revival* [1906] (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1998)

Roberts, Gwyneth Tyson, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998)

Roberts, Harri, 'A Tower of Babel: Heteroglossia, the Grotesque, and the (De)construction of Meaning in Glyn Jones's *The Valley, The City, The Village* and Niall Griffiths's *Grits*', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Vol. 7 (2001-02), pp. 106-29

Rowlands, Mari Puw, *Y Deryn Diarth* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1966)

Said, Edward D., *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 190

Selby, Keith, 'Hitting the Right Note: The Potency of Cheap Music', in Alan Bold (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* (London: Vision Press, 1990), pp. 89-113

Seymour-Smith, Martin, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* [1982] (London: Paladin Collins, 1987)

Silverman, Kaja, 'Masochism and Male Subjectivity', in *Camera Obscura*, No. 17 (May 1988), pp. 31-66

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986)

Stead, Peter, 'The Language of Edwardian Politics', in D. Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), pp. 148-165

Stephens, Meic (ed.), *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998)

Stevens, Catrin, *Welsh Courting Customs* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1993)

Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)

Sutherland, Gillian, *Elementary Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Historical Association, 1971)

Tedlock, E. W. (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet* (London: Heinemann, 1960)

Thomas, Dylan, *Collected Poems 1934-53*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud [1988] (London: Everyman, 1993)

Thomas, Dylan, *Collected Stories*, ed. Walford Davies [1983] (London: Everyman, 1993)

Thomas, Dylan, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris [1985] (London: Paladin, 1987)

Thomas, Dylan, *The Notebook Poems 1930-34*, ed. Ralph Maud (London: Dent, 1989)

Thomas, M. Wynn, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999)

Thomas, M. Wynn, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992)

Thomas, M. Wynn, 'Keeping His Pen Clean: R. S. Thomas and Wales', in William V. Davis (ed.), *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), pp. 61-79

Thomas, R. S., *Collected Poems: 1945-90* [1993] (London: Phoenix, 1995)

Thomas, R. S., *Neb* (Caernarfon: Gwasg Gwynedd, 1985)

Thomas, R. S., *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983)

Thomas, R. S., 'The Bread of Truth', *The Listener* (14 Nov 1963), p. 797

Thompson, Denys, 'Our Debt to Lamb', in F. R. Leavis (ed.), *Determinations: Critical Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), pp. 201-17

Thomson, Philip, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972)

Tripp, John, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Ormond (Bridgend: Seren, 1989)

Weeks, Jeffrey, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981)

Welsh, Irvine, *Trainspotting* [1993] (London: Vintage, 1999)

Wilks, Ivor, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839: Class Struggle as Armed Struggle* (London: Croom Helm, 1984)

Williams, Daniel, 'Beyond National Literature? Dylan Thomas and Amos Tutuola in "Igbo masquerade"', *New Welsh Review*, No. 60 (Summer 2003), pp. 5-12

Williams, David, *The Rebecca Riots* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955)

Williams, Elinor N. Williams, 'H.M. Inspectorate in Wales', in W. Gareth Evans (ed.), *Perspectives on a Century of Secondary Education in Wales 1889-1989* (Aberystwyth: Centre for Education Studies, 1990)

Williams, Gwyn A., *The Merthyr Rising* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978)

Willimas, Gwyn A., *When Was Wales?* [1985] (London: Penguin, 1991)

Williams, Jeni, ‘ “Oh, for our vanished youth”: Avoiding Adulthood in the Later Stories of Dylan Thomas’, in John Goodby and Chris Wigginton (eds.), *Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays*, New Casebooks Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 172-91

Williams, John Roberts, ‘Gwir Etifedd Saunders’, *Barn* (June 1992)

Williams, T. L., *Caradoc Evans*, Writers of Wales Series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970)

Williams, Trevor, ‘The Birth of a Reputation: Early Welsh Reaction to the Work of Caradoc Evans’, *Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol. 19, No. 44 (1971), pp. 147-71

Williams, Waldo, ‘Anglo-Welsh and Welsh’, *Dock Leaves*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (Winter 1953), pp. 31-5

Wintle, Justin, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* [1996] (London: Flamingo, 1997)

Yeats, W. B., *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* [1990] (London: Everyman, 1994)